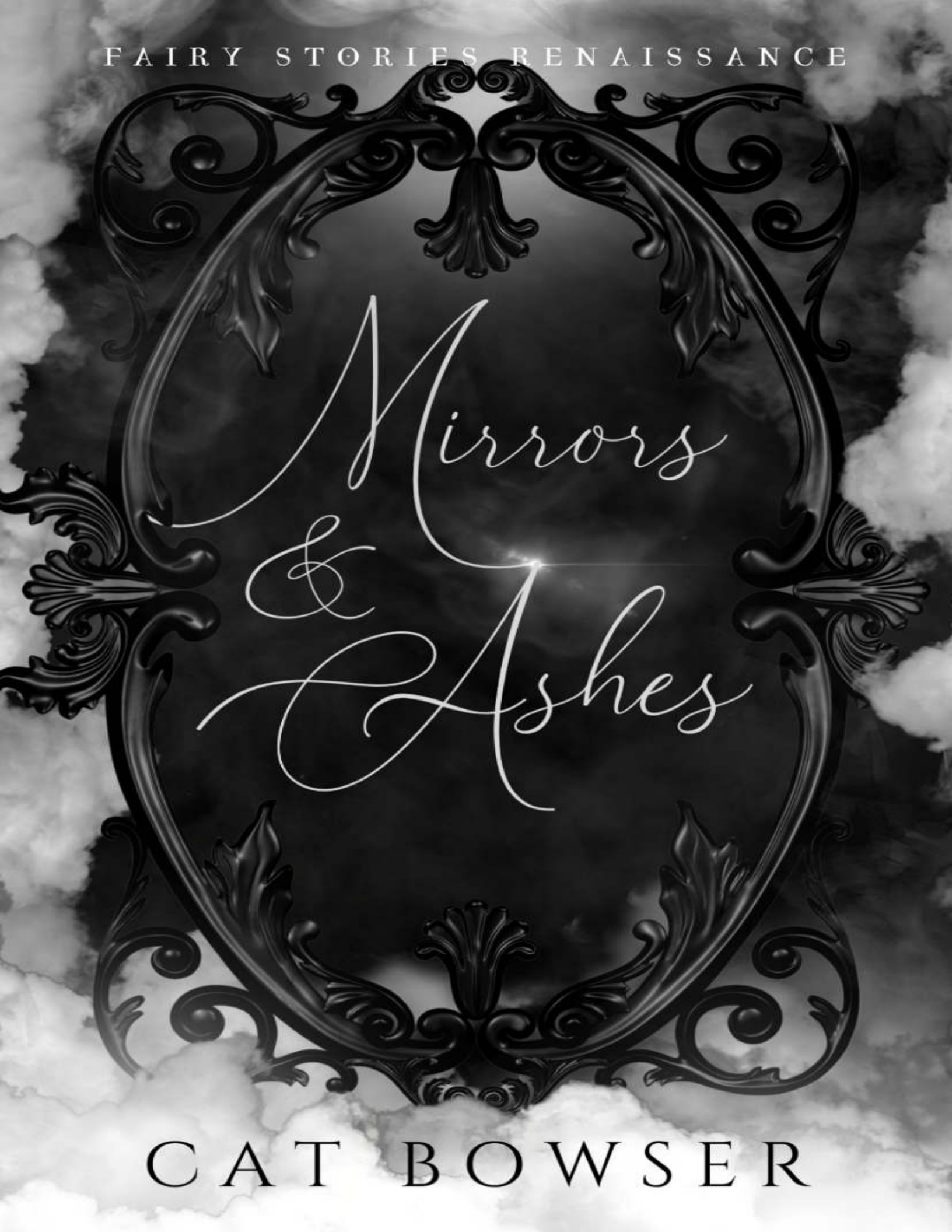
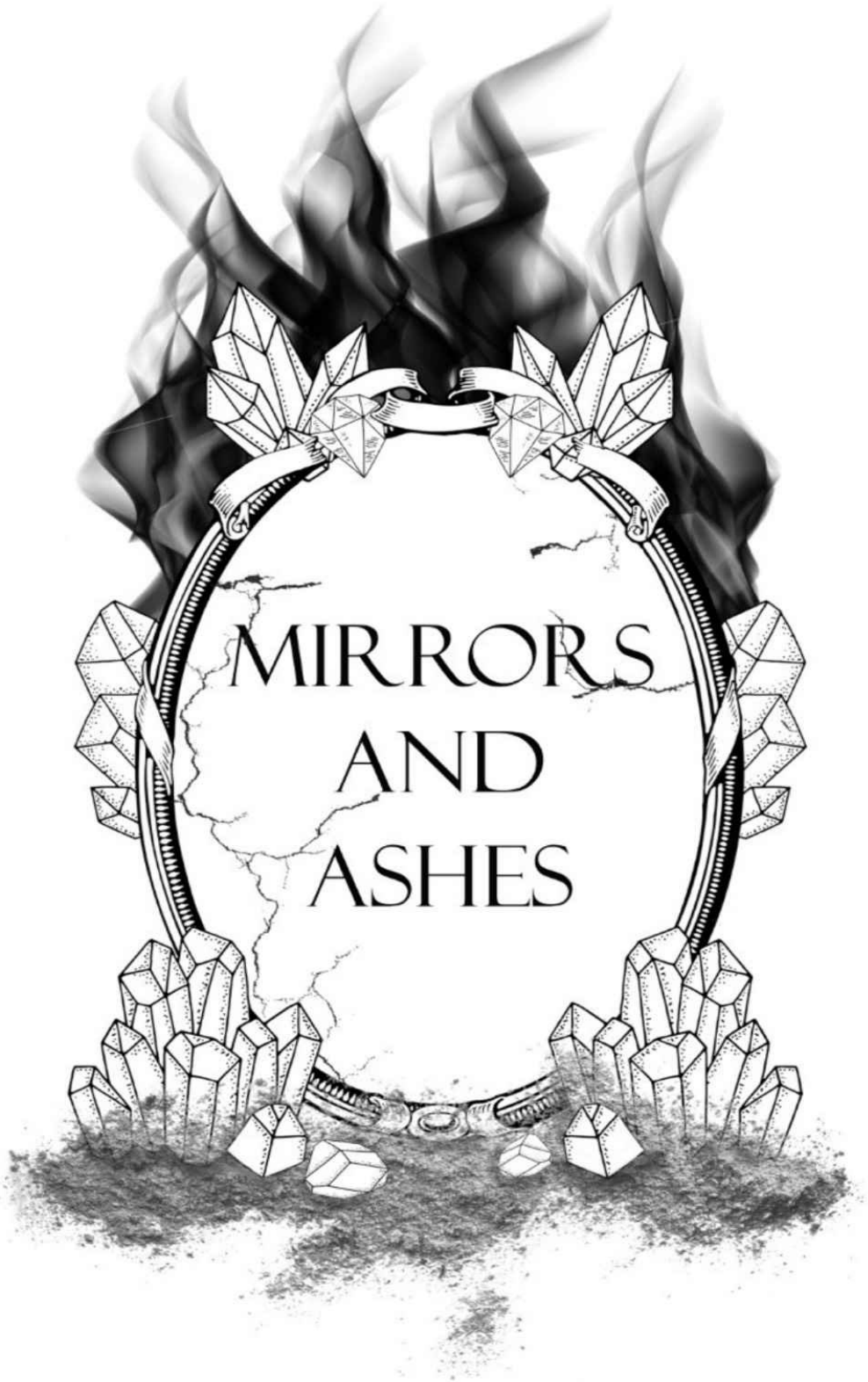
FAIRY STORIES RENAISSANCE



CAT BOWSER



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CONTENTS

Author's Note

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24

Acknowledgments
Author's Note
About the Author

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For my love, my Stephen, my strongest and constant cheerleader.
Thank you for being my rock.

For my Aunt Linda, whose support has been an irreplaceable backbone throughout this journey. This book owes so much to you.

For my mother-in-law, Eva and my father-in-law, Klay who have been priceless sources of enthusiasm, support, and love throughout this whole process. I couldn't do this without you.

And for my parents, on your Golden Anniversary, thank you for filling my world from the earliest I can remember with support, love, and showing me what a healthy family relationship is. May gold, silver, and gems fill all your years.

Author's Note

For CWs, please click HERE. If you do not wish to see them, proceed as normal.



Don't trust dwarves.

Everyone said so. Everyone born with a silver spoon in their mouth, in any event, and they never failed to center their warnings on her—as Princess, it was her job to be aware of all dangers and dwarves provided the worst kind.

So they said.

Such warnings never held much weight for her, despite her parents' and the staff's best efforts. She would assess advice given to her and decide on her own if it constituted wisdom or folly. Despite the many years of experience her would-be mentors possessed, most of their warnings were folly.

Secure with said knowledge in mind, Princess Ember did as she always did—ignored it.

Pulling on a pair of boy's riding breeches and an overly long tunic with far too many holes, she slipped one step at a time down the long stairwell leading into the castle's depths. Having to don such unsightly rags pulled a shudder from her but it wouldn't do to dirty up her best things.

And all her clothes were her best things.

Down here, amid the deepest corridors of the palace lay her favorite place. It was where the hired workers would perform their magic, be it in the making of clothes, the folding of steel, or the illumination of long manuscripts painstakingly line by line. Her favorite of their spells were their skilled crafts.

Dwarven workers made their arts amid the bellows of smoke and flame, locked away from the pristine court life of above. Prejudice against the creatures certainly had no sway over her parents' decision to employ them, even if the nobles would only speak of them in hushed whispers. Daddy made every effort to keep their faces contained below amid the soot and sawdust.

Her upper lip curled into a snarl at the thought.

Granted, they were odd-looking creatures, rather blunt and abrupt, especially to those who didn't know them, be they royalty or not—she would admit truth to all those accusations. Upon first meeting, they had not bowed to her father or her mother because they "aren't our rulers." No apology, merely a statement of the straight facts.

The King had been appalled.

The Queen had been enraged.

The staff had been horrified.

Ember had been intrigued.

The world needed more folk mirroring such a sentiment. People not willing to navigate the political labyrinth with manipulation and false smiles traded for a favor. The idea that she could plop herself amid the dwarves and they'd tell her the honest-to-Paradise truth without her having to guess what was for her benefit and what was for theirs was a relief she experienced far too little.

Mother and Daddy had been horrific in their disagreement about the dwarves' behavior—the blatant disrespect of the creatures refusing to kneel—but eventually, the raw strength and talent of the dwarven workers deemed them far too valuable an asset to let go for a minute political slight. Even Mother, for all her disgust at their appearance, their crude tongue, and seeming lack of manners, was enchanted by their ability to work with gold.

And truthfully, once Mother decided something, no one dared argue.

But no one could argue the quality of dwarven skill.

Their work with gold was nothing compared to the miracles they could achieve with gems. Jewels from the Goddess of Joy's lips would dull next to those carved cuts. To say nothing of the art created from wood and stone!

Dwarves knew the secrets of steel and spoke the tongue of Damascus.

Fae were but a poor reflection. Experts at trickery, tricks fell apart in workmanship as glass under hammer. Or in the case of Fae crafts, wood fractured and lost its shine, steel splintered and fell in pieces to the ground, and gems faded as dull as river stones. If one was lucky enough to receive genuine material and not illusionary spells.

Dwarves had made all of Ember's childhood toys and she could call several of their makers by name. Despite the rough life her trinkets and games were put through, their craftsmanship held firm. Now as she approached maturity—not even a year away from adulthood—they formed the clasps of her hair, the decorations of her sashes. The curves of silver and emerald would catch the light and paint stars in her hair. Not once did the metal dull, the wood splinter, the cloth tear or the gem chip or crack. Naturally nothing but the best was acceptable and Daddy had deemed them to be the best. Their work backed it up.

Amid the cacophony of decorum and ceremony of court, the smile of a soot-stained dwarf was worth more than a feast during famine. They never failed in kindness to her and unlike so many other hired help, they never soured her day with bowing, pampering, or coddling. Unlike her father, they never shook their heads and smiled as if they couldn't be bothered to try and explain something. Unlike her mother, they never gave a mighty sigh and reminded her of how much trouble they would have to undergo to "fix" her mistakes.

She was at ease with them.

More of that, please!

Pushing against the large oak door at the bottom of the stair, she strained, giving a low oof when her black hair trailed into her eyes. *If Mother and Daddy weren't so stubborn, I could have brought someone to open this for me!*

Her parents would never approve of such a thing though; it was one thing when she was younger but now that she was older and all the closer to taking the throne, even Daddy was losing patience for what was considered 'uncouth' behavior.

Luckily, much as Ember loved her father, she didn't have to listen to

him.

With a last push, the door slid against the stoned floor, conjuring puffs of dirt, widening the gap between the two large, oaken slates enough for her to squeeze through. It took all her father's chosen guard to push it open entirely. Here she was, an adult (if only by a few months) struggling and panting, yet a dwarven child could move it with ease.

She'd seen it.

Her first introduction to Tyr had been at the doors and their friendship grew from there. Utter confusion had claimed her at first, given he had a thin but full beard yet he'd proclaimed he'd been her age at the time, with only eight blessing anniversaries of the Goddess of Life's gift.

She noticed he never came to help her with the doors again though!

Would it kill the dwarves to send someone to help her when they heard the door? No one but her came down in such a secretive way. Seemed a minor thing to ask.

As the door slammed shut with a loud, grinding sound behind her, narrowly missing her baggy shirt sleeves in the process, Ember turned and inhaled deeply, taking in the rich smell of soot, coal, and fire. The dusting of wood settled in the air from her left and the odd, nearly acidic, scent of liquid glass came from the right. The warmth of forges and the sharp grunting of bellows was a welcomed sound; a song of return.

Since today was not a day of rest, the dwarves were never tardy, the hall of the craftsmen was full.

"Ah! Little Ember!"

Only one person would attach 'Little' to her when she towered over them. The name carried history with it and Ember embraced it.

Coming around the bend of a collection of wooden benches, silk-smooth with use but nevertheless functional and beautiful in their own right, was Friga, one of the most familiar faces of the workers. Female dwarves were tall, thick, and heavy but Friga was impossible to miss, even among them.

All dwarves were colored like gems—green, blue, purple, red, orange, and all the colors in between. In rareness, one would see silver, white or gold. Tyr had what they called 'star-paint,' where everything on him was white, a rarity on top of rarity. Certainly made him easy to spot, if Ember desired to seek him out. Families usually followed similar hues —cool or warm but Tyr's family didn't mimic his white. That was all his own.

Regardless of color, all dwarves shimmered. Luminescence glistened

on their bodies, making them appear as jewels in the night even without the glow of the forges. Their skin carried an otherworld hue, with their hair falling limp and dull in contrast. It reminded Ember of fire-flies.

Except Friga. Well, not quite true, not entirely. She had once carried the glow of silver and crystal, but now it had dulled to the slate grey of the river rocks. Her skin had taken on the rough texture that resembled jewel facets the younger dwarves like Tyr were spared.

It appeared even dwarves could not escape the tint shift of age.

But those long green tresses still held the sparkle of gems—the colored beads woven into her long braids. Ember could not even tell where one braid began and another stopped. Oh, what would her hair look like if she tried? All knots probably. Braiding was something she had no talent for, at least on herself.

"Friga!" Wrapping her arms tight around the dwarven woman, Ember pulled back after a moment, grinning. Her face crinkled, a small bit, at the strong scent of sweat following. "I was hoping you'd still be around."

"I have no plans to go anywhere, darlin'," the elder's voice rumbled with the harshness of granite but carried no small amount of affection. "What brings you down to our little playground?"

It was no secret Mother and Daddy did not approve of her venturing down here. Granted, she could technically make her own decisions but with her day to take over the throne approaching in the next year or so, they were even more insistent that she maintain proper appearances. However, they had also not forbidden her from conversing and she was glad to take advantage of their lack of specifics. They certainly cared enough to still employ them but there was heaviness about whenever Ember arrived. Not out of disrespect or any dislike—quite the contrary—but the cruel reprimands of the Queen echoed through even thick dwarven stone.

"I have a question." Ember's tone was full of urgency, as if the world might collapse inward upon itself without a response immediately. With the kind of request she came with however, such a sense of urgency was more than acceptable. Wasn't it important to answer a Princess' need as quickly as possible? She'd never been refused before and it seemed foolhardy to expect any change.

"Just one? I'd have thought a girl of your mind would have several." Friga curled her leathery skin up in a smile, making Ember groan.

"'Course I have more than one! But it's rude to drown your host in too many questions." She spoke firmly, as one with absolute authority on the matter. "I had one of my favorite necklaces break and figured you all

could fix it for me."

"Now, where did you get such a crazy idea?" Friga held her hand out for the item. "Where would I *ever* find a jewelry expert down here?"

Looking around, twisted on her shoes, Ember named people with the skill for such a task currently missing from sight. "Well, there's Tyr. Leifa. Abana…"

"Are you trying to get a horse fitted for shoes or a necklace fixed?" Friga said with a twist of her left hand, gesturing for the requested necklace once more.

With a sudden oof, Ember tumbled forward with two pairs of arms to pull her back. "Let us do it, let us do it. We can do it Ember!"

Tyr and Kva.

They were the youngest of the dwarves, a rare treat because dwarves took their craftsmanship so seriously. She'd seen young dwarves up here if they could harness fire and steel to be of any use. Tyr and Kva were good but not quite as good as the others yet. But they each had talent, if the trinkets they often brought her were any indication.

Ember had never been good at dwarven ages but she knew from Friga that Tyr was slightly older than her—but only by a year or so. As for Kva, even taking into account how long dwarves lived and the fact that she was reportedly 'catching up to him' placed her in the same category. Much as Ember wished they could spend more time together down here—having friends her own age was rarity indeed—the craftsmen's' hall wasn't a place to play and she couldn't ask to go down to a dwarven home.

She just couldn't.

Oh, no one had told her such but the seriousness invading even the most playful of eyes at the simple mention of 'home' was enough to still even her tongue.

No small feat.

"We heard the Kingdom of Gralcimm is bringing representatives tonight! Is that true?" Kva's voice echoed with anticipation.

Tyr added. "We stopped doing business with them before I was born. They're a bad omen!"

"And they work with Fae! Even worse!" Kva gently jostled Ember's shoulder. "Especially *those* Fae! *Those* Fae wouldn't tell the truth even if you were holding a crossbow to their throat."

Will you let me speak?

"Tyr! Kva!" Friga interrupted their barrage of questions. "I assume you did not just leave your forges ablaze with fresh metal in its belly?"

Tyr, his white skin casting shadows from the nearby bellows, gave the faintest imitation of dark across his face. He scowled and his beaded braids jingled. “Really, Friga, give us some credit! I know better than to mess with Nanud when it comes to work! Do you really think I would be so careless? I haven’t scorched a piece of metal since I was a first year apprentice.”

Friga just reached out and pinched the boy’s white-colored hair ever so slightly, drawing a wince. Ember never understood why dwarves pulled on braids like that but she sure saw it a lot from irritated ones. “Considering you didn’t immediately tell me ‘no’ color me suspicious.”

Pulling away with a scoff, Tyr thundered, begging his voice to echo over the nearby pounding of hammer on metal. “Don’t look at me! I know I did stupid the first few times but how often have I done it since then? Huh?” With a low snort, he added. “I’m almost an adult!”

Friga considered, her head tilted to the side. “Almost, indeed.” After a pause, she set her gaze from Tyr to the other dwarven child. “Kva?”

The girl, her purple hair trailing into her face with each movement (her braids did not hold well) insisted, “No, no, honest, we did leave it safe!” She added, at the sharp look to her from Tyr. “Well, Tyr did. And I did too. Mostly.

“Mostly. Most isn’t worth wet coals, girl. Is it empty or is it not?”

“Uh…not completely?” she offered with a twist of her foremost braid around a finger.

Grasping Kva by the lower back braid with a loud yelp from her in protest, Friga took the girl, saying, “Give us a moment, darlin’,” to Ember. Without waiting for her to give so much as a response, Friga vanished amid the dark corridor decorated with shadowy fire.

She acts like my governess, good ol’ Henriette, Ember pondered, not for the first time. Not necessarily a bad thing. She was probably her best listener, at least of the non-dwarven kind. Full of spunk, fun, and heart but completely capable of rendering Ember small and guilt-filled if she thought it would drive a lesson home.

And it had been Henriette’s talk of dwarves without snarl, sneer, or harshness that led Ember down here in the first place, years ago. A rather interesting introduction it had been—a collection of misinterpretations (a dwarf as young as eight having a beard!), awkward questions (why had she asked why they painted on themselves?), and awkward staring (Damascus enchanted the eye), but one she remained grateful for making the mild censures the old woman might give her easier to swallow.

Ember looked about and spied a simple stack of boxes. They were

heavy, barely moving when she nudged them, so they seemed appropriate to utilize as a seat until Friga returned. A pain to move them, but move them she would. Sitting on one covered in soot and dust? No, thank you. The third one she found finally seemed suitable and she pulled it astride the others.

Tyr watched her but never offered to help; quite rude, honestly, but given he was a fun conversationalist, she could forgive him.

Plus, it kept her out of the way of the rushing dwarves. For their small size, they were never still nor slow.

"Why the rush?" She turned to Tyr, who had slipped to the left, just enough to be out of the dwarves' path as they dashed around the corner. He'd narrowly avoided getting an eyeful of shovel by rushing groups of miners. Ember scooted as far to one edge as she could to avoid any residue. A little was fine but she had no desire to be painted black.

The boy winced to her inquiry, but with a tease in his blue eyes. They always carried a special sparkle—contrasted against his white skin, his white hair, and the silver tattoos of crescent moons on his face—but when he was full of uncertainty, an additional glint entered his sight.

"Felsk's braids, it's not one thing; it's a lot of things!"

Felsk was the Dwarven God of Strength, if the stories of the Unknown Army and Ghost Kingdom appearing and vanishing with the new moon were any indication. The idea of a dwarf forging chains to restrain the moon or create an invisible paint with the resistance of stone had always fascinated her and given Tyr selected the phases of the heavenly body to serve as his Dwarven marks, he fascinated her, too. It wasn't really a surprise referring to his braids, his hammer or even his boots (more crude a term) was a common phrase. Yet, Tyr held the God in high reverence; it meant something of large significance to drop Felsk's name.

Interest peaked and her eyes widened. "Oh? Like what? Something I should know?"

Pushing his white hair back, Tyr grumbled under his breath before tucking the loose strands into the bead on his right side. All dwarves had braids, but there was something special about the kind of braid, which was news to her, as she thought there were a finite number of ways one could braid hair. Oh, the dwarves proved her wrong multiple times over.

Tyr's were straight with two simple beads made of sapphire—symbols of accomplishment within a field of study. The long braid trailing down his back was a gift from his family, representing his true name or something. They didn't talk about it much and she didn't ask.

But loose braids were uncouth so no matter how important the information he possessed was, he wasn't going to tell her without fixing his braids first.

"Can I help?" She held her hands out. "I know I can't do braids on myself real well but—" She stopped talking by taking a hold of Tyr's dangling braids. Maybe she couldn't do great braids, but he could help her—

"Stop it!" His arm swung out and collided with hers, leaving a sharp sting. "Don't touch me!"

Ember jerked, eyes widened. They'd played games together for years, wrestled occasionally but he'd never struck her, even in jest. "Tyr, I'm just trying to help you!"

No!" Tyr paled, until he seemed to almost disappear. Eyes wide, he withdrew a good two feet from her, as if she was going to poison him with her touch. "No, no, I have to do it myself." He unwove the twin strands of hair and as if he recognized the harsh clap in his voice, he added. "Can you hold the beads for me?"

"Nice you trust me *so* much." Huffing, she folded her arms and turned her back to him. After all the times she'd come down here, she'd never disappointed them (no one had told her otherwise) and they couldn't even let her help do something as simple as braids? "Did you have to hit me?'

"It wasn't a hit. I know how strong I am and I know how strong you are. It was a sting, if even that. And I told you not to touch me. You don't touch a dwarf's hair, Ember unless you're allowed to." He scowled, leveling a caustic look. "I didn't give you permission."

"You don't trust me to help?"

"No. Not for that. Just because you're a Princess doesn't mean you're always welcomed." He added, with a rather sour absolution, "And just because you're my friend doesn't mean you get permission without asking."

The absolution in his tone left her feeling bare and naked. Exposed. Abandoned. Why? After all, she'd only been trying to help. Why did he have to get so pissy? What kind of friend acted like that?

But Tyr was so hard to stay mad at.

With a sigh, she shifted back around and held her hand out, accepting the blue, four-pointed gems, reflections of the silver marks marred into his temples by the hairline. Every bead was unique for each dwarf, selected designs chosen by the wearer. Tyr said they were meant to reflect his achievements, his family, his personality. The blue orbs were

carved with curved edges and a light shimmer of silver barely to be seen at the ends. She rolled them in her hands as Tyr worked his braids, swallowing the large lump in her throat.

She'd never been the subject of dwarven ire before. Tyr would tease and occasionally get frustrated but not like that.

And why? It was only braids.

Yet, the way he reacted, maybe she wasn't thinking about what he thought. After all, surely dwarves were different in so many ways… maybe braids weren't the same as they were to her? They sure were fancier than what she knew.

"Sorry."

Ember plopped the gems into his outstretched hand at the solemn apology. Dwarves were horrific liars and Tyr was worse than most. The way his head was down, his eyes dropped, and his hand awkwardly scratching at the three silver tattoos on his upper right arm, he couldn't have convinced her he was insincere if she could read his mind.

"Wasn't trying to be rude." She sat back, swung her feet in frustration and more than a pinch of agitation. "It's just braids."

"For you. Not us." The finality to those words held no room for argument and Ember rubbed her neck with a dusting of shame to her face. So, she was right; it wasn't the same. Her tongue worked far too quick for her mind at times, but it was rare she recognized it.

Impossible to miss this one.

"Right." Much as she wanted to pry, to ask, to demand more details, dwarves were a secretive bunch and given how most people treated them, they had full rights to be. She wasn't always too keen on explaining why she did or didn't do something and her race wasn't the Kingdom's scapegoat.

Time to be practicing queen-ness and swallow her pride.

"So," she said again. "What are all these things you were talking about?" What had the dwarves heard about the upcoming meetings that were so urgent? She heaved a relieved sigh when the light came back to his eyes.

"So much, Ember. I don't know a lot of it, but I know Mother and Brother-of-my-Father were discussing the Fae coming with the ally ambassadors tonight."

"The Fae. Have they seen them?" Fae were not welcomed. Not without good cause anyway and the risk of people revolting went sky-high with Fae involved.

Yet, there'd been nothing unusual about the way the people

conducted themselves today. The same old ways, the same preparation, and the same chores.

Unless they didn't know.

Daddy might not have been keen on keeping such a strong and volatile factor of negotiations secret, but Ember would not put it past her mother for a moment. Mother's priorities went: herself, the Kingdom, her husband, then Ember, in that order.

She doubted her judgement most of the time, but as a Princess and one not well versed in the intricacies of court or the navigation of the political labyrinth, she had little room to voice such things.

Except down here.

"Fae. Why would Mother risk it? What would Fae have to offer her? And did your Uncle and Mother see the Fae?" Maybe too many questions but this needed investigating!

"Brother-of-my-Father didn't say. But he wouldn't have said anything if he didn't have solid evidence. Not his nature."

Indeed not. Maur was an uptight fellow, blue as the deepest ocean (which, Ember had not seen, but given the tales sailors jabbered about, it must be a sight indeed), with so many silver and indigo markings on his skin it looked more like some kind of odd opal, retrieved from the depths of the earth. He was older—older than even Friga.

He was a fair dwarf, as far as Ember could tell, from the brief mists of time she had seen him amid the workers. Never what one would call grumpy or cruel but rather realistic. He didn't have a tongue for common, but he would smile and nod if he happened to overhear one of her conversations with Tyr, a silent approval of her thought process.

Oh, what a welcome treat, being regarded as if she were intelligent and capable of independent thought! About time!

"What did he say then?"

"Just that the Fae has been around." Tyr folded his arms and leaned back. Reaching around a dwarf walking by, he snagged two pears from the box they carried, calling, "*Lukin*," the dwarven term for thanks, near as Ember could tell, and tossed one to her.

Taking a bite, she asked, bits of fruit flying from her mouth as she spoke, "What's it mean 'been around?'"

"*Ne-ne*." He shrugged. "Details are sketchy, but somethin' about the Kingdoms of Marlkrig, Widlug, and Helmwil are involved. He's been doing trade with them."

Three kingdoms, all within a couple of days ride of one another. "Daddy spoke about them being potential allies. But the Kingdom of

Gralcimm is closer and they're coming tonight."

Tyr nodded. "And where do you think the Fae was said to be passing through when they headed through all those kingdoms?"

"Gralcimm?"

"So they say." He sighed and leaned back tossing the stem of his fruit into the nearest glowing fire—after a glance to make sure only the laboring dwarf's back had his attention. "Fae don't move around and they sure don't let you *see* them move. Not unless they want you to."

"So…should I be worried they're moving or worried they let you see them moving?"

"Both, probably."

Huffing, blowing her long bangs up, she rocked back and forth. "What do Fae have to offer us? And why would anyone trust them?"

"Well, I mean, I guess they *could* be legitimate." Tyr leveled one brow at her. "Just like I *could* decide tomorrow to become a minstrel and roam the countryside singing about the wonders of apples."

Giggling, curled fist to preserve it from view, Ember elaborated. "Possible but not likely."

"Exactly."

Silence followed for a time.

"Well, what should I do?"

"Can you keep them from becoming allies?" He answered quickly. Almost too quickly, as if doused in a sudden panic. "I mean, I know it might be throwing away some trade or something, but I think it's too risky. Too much stuff unanswered." Wincing a little, he rubbed his front braids, frantically from top to bottom, "Sounds bad, doesn't it? I mean… they *could* just be trying to do good but it seems too…"

"Neat? Sudden? Out of character?" Offering a slew of words was easy. Supposedly, there had been a share of good-natured Fae, but everyone said elves came from them—descendants of those turned from trickery. And the few that might still remain certainly wouldn't have the Fae Leaders' permission to gallivant about like this.

Unless it *was* a Fae Leader. Literal eons of experience with magic, manipulation, and the silver tongue.

Maybe it was being harsh, but Ember thought harsh was an understandable reaction to a creature capable of magicking someone into a frog or a flower or something equally as unpleasant.

She was pretty sure she would make a fine flower but an unattractive frog.

She had a feeling her nursemaids had not told her the darker tales.

"Don't know." She said finally. "Mother doesn't usually listen to me and Daddy thinks I'm a naïve, little girl pretending to be in charge in court." She admitted, shame coloring her face. "I mean, they're kind of right but doesn't mean I'm not worth listening to." Lifting her head, she added. "I have important things to say."

Tyr took her hand and gave her a gentle squeeze. "I don't think they're right. But I know they've kind of painted you into one kind of weapon. Tells you what they know. Maybe do what you can. Just try. If you're wrong, you can always beg for forgiveness, right?"

A common exchange between them whenever something risky was to be had. It was always preferable to beg forgiveness than to ask permission. And as a Princess, there was very little she wouldn't be able to get herself out of. Especially with Daddy.

"I could—"

"Tyr." The voice carried weight, authority, and determination. "Are you planning on returning to work sometime before *all* the swords are made?"

Yelping, Tyr was back on his feet. "Sorry! Sorry!" He called, even adding a, "Gaausno's Beard, sorry!" which was some sort of dwarven God gauging authenticity as far as Ember knew. Tyr paused just long enough to raise his palm to her in farewell before squeezing through the rows of workers, leaving the girl sitting alone.

What to do? Court manners and ideals were definitely not her forte but she had to admit, Tyr had a point. Maybe she *was* too harsh on Fae, or at least, was not as open minded as a ruler should be, but it was hard to be after…the things Fae had done in the Kingdom. Was it really so bad to be cautious after being hurt before?

And not even her but her people. The subjects she was supposed to defend and protect. As of late, both her parents almost seemed to forget that part of ruling unless it benefited them.

A headache emerged and she rubbed her temples accordingly.

"Now, Ember, might I see what you came to ask for help with?"

Drawn back by the reappearance of Friga, the girl inwardly sighed for the distraction from the battlefield in her mind, reached into her tunic and withdrew the necklace of question.

It was an old family item, woven of silver chains and touched in each loop with a gem of green. One of the links on the chain had split.

"Mother and Daddy said I have to attend their silly meeting tonight and I should wear the colors of our house." Her face darkened. "Allies and…trade." Should she ask Friga? No. No, it wasn't the dwarves'

problem. Grateful as she was for the intel, it was her issue to fix. Not theirs.

Friga cocked her head as she fingered the metal item. “Well, this is an easy fix, if you’ve half a heartbeat to wait.” She waved the girl to follow her and Ember responded without hesitation, trotting after the elder dwarrow.

“Now.” she remarked as she applied heat to the forge. “What is this about allies and trade that have you so stormy-faced? Aside from the usual restrictions that come with it.” Her voice carried a faint inquisitive tone but nothing more. All the same, the direct point to Ember’s heart-sick left her baffled, which she had no shame in voicing.

“How do you do that?” The girl asked instead of a direct response. “Always know how I’m feeling even if I don’t say anything. Even Henriette isn’t that good.” She watched the dwarrow, a proper name for a female dwarf, she had learned several years ago, as they spoke, both watching her body tense and how her hands somehow seemed to bend metal with nary an effort for the flame bath.

“I could give you many an answer, Child.” Her voice warmed the atmosphere even more than the heat from the forge as she began what Ember described as metal-magic. “But the short answer is: I have learned your voice and so has the stone here.”

“The stone?” Parroting in both voice and gesture, Ember shielded her eyes from the stinging heat. “What do you mean the stone knows my voice?”

“Ah, yes, you humans have forgotten much, haven’t you?” Sadness colored her words, a deep sadness. Maybe odd to say—how could an emotion be ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ at all? No other phrase seemed appropriate. Like how the bells of churches could ring with ancient sounding chimes or the rivers of the forest could smell pure, her voice felt drenched in sorrow. “No matter, little Ember…”

“No.” Twisting her hands into fists on Friga’s sleeve, her mouth set in a firm line. “I want to know, Friga. What do you mean? Tell me!”

After a brief pause, Friga straightened and waved Ember back from the fire as she removed the hot metal to reform it. “Humans have forgotten how to listen. There are answers and thoughts all around you—in the earth, the rivers, even the stone on which you walk or within your home. You visit us a lot and the stone here has learned your spirit as well as I know your face.”

Ruffled brow and scrunched nose, despite herself, Ember remarked, “And the stone talks to you?” She pressed her fingers on the wall to her

left; as if it would press back even if she had leaned on it many a time without so much as stone to crumble. “Never hear anything.”

A low laugh and one delivered without malice. It was a trait of Friga. No matter how silly Ember felt, or how foolish her question must have seemed, any laughter was always out of kindness. Such it remained.

“Stone doesn’t talk, Girl.”

“But…you said…”

“Aye, you humans have forgotten much.” She set down the mended necklace to cool and addressed Ember with seriousness to her tone. “I can look at a red hot metal and see all its flaws, all its strengths. One does not just hear with your ears, nor just see with your eyes. Humans restrict their senses to one when they are capable of many. I cannot describe how stone talks to you, Child. You will know when it does and it will do so when it’s ready.” She brushed the girl’s cheek, leaving behind a fingerprint of ash. “You will learn. You listen so much better than most.”

Rather than get caught up in the fact what Friga had said made no sense whatsoever, Ember instead focused on the praise. “I try to listen. And your stories are the best, Friga. Do you have time to…maybe tell me another one?”

Friga often told her stories and they were always better than those from her parents. Maybe it was because they were so different, but Ember felt the dwarven stories were always deeper, more intense, and to be frank, more adult. Her parents always cautioned her to be mindful of her ‘soft’ nature.

Soft. They would call her soft, say her skin shade—more pure and white than any other in the kingdom—had been given in response to her mother’s wish because she had the delicacy of snow.

Ember was determined to be free of the notion one day and Friga was one of the many ways she could try achieve the goal set in her heart.

“Another tale? Oh, Child, you will wear my tongue out before too long and I dare say, you could recite nearly all our tales back to me with nary a mistake to be found!”

Flattered but well aware of the limits of politeness, Ember shook her head, her black hair fraying from side to side amid the warm gusts of heat. “You know that’s silly, Friga! I know a lot of your stories but there’s more stories in the Dwarven tongue than shells on the beaches, leaves in the forests, and stone in the earth—combined! I know you’ve not told me them all!”

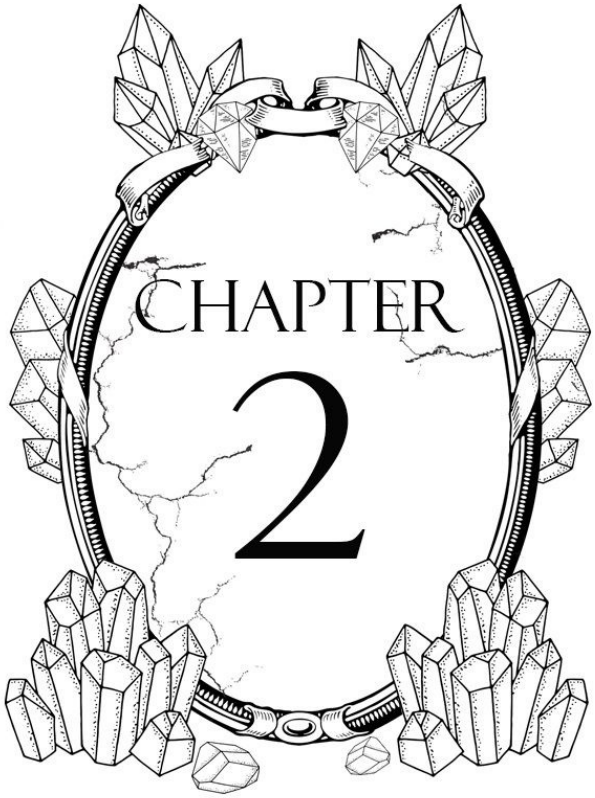
Chuckling lightly, Friga rocked a bit on her feet. “You’ve a clever mind and you listen well. Oh, remind me. What have I told you?”

Laughing, Ember answered. “I could be here all day telling you what you’ve told me. I know of the Fallen Kingdom. I know of the Ivory Sea. I know about the army born from nothing. I know of the legend of reunification. I know about the white flame—“

Shaking head with a gentle whistle she let out through her teeth when flabbergasted, Friga gave a light clap. “Aye, we’ve told you many tales! What to give you now…hmm.” She tapped her chin for a few minutes. Ember knew that look. The eyes always gave it away—the way her pupils sparkled and she barely contained herself as she paced to and fro on her feet was a dead giveaway. “So many tales you know so well. And so much older and wiser you are now. Perhaps I can enlighten you with the tale of living fire?”

Ember didn’t care if she got disapproving glances anymore. She was *not* leaving until she knew all about what dwarves called ‘living fire.’

“I’m listening.”



"Then did you catch him?"

The old farmer gave a low laugh, pausing to take a drink from his wineskin. Not really a wineskin, being he'd filled it with water a mere few hours earlier. Farmer Timothy was an odd sort but he always had water on his person and a story on his tongue.

Ember lived for the stories.

There were so many among the village that she never heard from the nobility. Some of the dangers of the wood, some of the ancient curses that still crept about bogs and lakes, some silly about drunken men towing around a cow they did not own calling them "Moobert" and her favorites—the personal stories.

Kicking her feet back and forth, she scooted back a ways on the large post surrounding the man's small bit of property. Perching on the fence kept her feet away from the mud below. Snorts of pigs and the light

cluck of chickens as they scurried to and from along the property was a pleasant melody. She could picture the pig in question darting around and almost stopped to look for it.

"Catch him?"

Shaking his head, the man paused to wipe his brow. Timothy was actually not much older than the Queen but Ember always thought he looked more like a grandfather than a new father. Hours in the hot sun had baked his skin so it resembled more of a lizard and less of a man. Spots and age colored the flesh in odd splotches and some of them were different shades—ones not in sync with the rest of his body.

His laugh never dulled, though.

"Catch 'em?" He said, again. "Oh, it was more like caught *me*! Last time I tried to take on Old Fred, that's for sure."

Covering her mouth, Ember turned as Tyr lifted himself to perch on the lowest rail of the fence next to her. While the dwarven folk might have concealed themselves away from the voices and sneers of court, the more reasonable and patient people of the working class didn't really care one way or the other, usually.

And among farmers like Timothy, anyone capable of mending a fence or repairing a scythe was more than welcome on the land! That was why Tyr had originally come actually—the old man had remarked his hoe needed mending and Tyr was more than happy to offer a hand. Ember loved any excuse to mingle among the people and invited herself along.

"So, is Ol' Fred still around?" Tyr looked behind him toward the farmyard, trying to identify which of the potential pigs scurrying about in the yard might have been the culprit to bring three men to their knees.

"Oh, he's about." Timothy patted his stomach. "Couldn't keep a lot of 'em, good price he fetched, but I felt takin' a small sample was fair."

Despite her having all the resources of the palace cooks and bakers, Ember's mouth watered. The way Timothy treated his animals, even the ones like Ol' Fred who didn't exactly always repay him with the same kindness, she could imagine what sweetness would come out in such meat. Part of her was tempted to ask if he had even a fraction of it left. She would gladly purchase it for beyond a fair price. She had the access to pure gold if he wanted it.

But, she had her choice of any type of meat she desired. Seemed selfish to deprive her people of the small luxuries they had.

Doing the right thing sometimes meant her stomach was disappointed.

"I can't say we've had much trouble with pigs." Tyr pushed himself

up on his tiptoes, leaning on the fence as the wind gave a hefty gust across the field, rippling the wheat stalks. “We use hogs but I don’t think any of them came even close to Old Fred in size.”

Ember laughed, pushing her hair back again as the wind wrestled it from the three small buns she wore atop her head to join the rest, loose and free about her shoulders. “I don’t think I’ve seen or heard of *any* pigs coming close to Old Fred!”

If not for her green clothing decked out in swirls of silk and green stones, one could have been forgiven for thinking that Ember was one of Timothy’s friends or perhaps even a cousin come to visit to alleviate the monotony of work. While she’d move herself lightly to avoid mud and dirt, she also didn’t think twice of relieving her thirst from Timothy’s offered canteen.

“I don’t think it’s possible for pigs to get up to Old Fred’s size.” A teasing twinkle took Ember’s eyes. “Are you certain you didn’t get offerings from the Gods to help with that?”

“No divine intervention needed or taken.” Timothy allowed himself to puff up his chest in pride. “Started as a runt!”

“Well, luckily, he was born to a farmer that knows what he’s doing.”

“You’re a doll, Princess,” the feminine voice drew Ember’s attention. The shaggy, brown head of Timothy’s wife, Helen, poked its way between Ember and Tyr as they rested on the old fence. She had a bucket draped over her arm and gave a smile and nod to each of their guests, the tiny bump under her dress almost invisible, fading with each day—the sign of her successful birth.

Well, the baby on her back was the real clue.

“You’re a storyteller, dear Princess. Why don’t you give us a story since we seem to be short on new ones?”

Joy welled up in her chest, expanding so her entire face glowed under the sun. Standing, gathering her balance atop the fence, she grinned, spinning about on one foot for appearance. “The tale of Zadkhanûn!” Her voice thundered out in a sour note and she coughed. “Sorry.”

Tyr rolled his eyes but gave a laugh all the same. “You always talk about that story!”

Helen offered a look of sympathy toward the young dwarf. “If a story captures our heart when we’re young, it scarcely lets go of it.” She murmured a laugh into her sleeve. “I’m sure we have bored our poor Princess with our tales of Gilly and Phillip.”

Ember considered arguing because she loved the tales that the regular peasants had. Stories less fantastical than the ones shared at court but

they carried a homey feeling to them.

But she would forever be drawn to her favorite story.

"I believe you dwarves have a tale on it as well, do you not?" Timothy took another drink of water then passed it along the line, with Ember taking a swig last.

"I—" Tyr began but Ember beat him to it.

"They do! But it's not the same. Not at the end. They say Mother Earth—"

"Mother *Stone*," Tyr offered his correction with a light degree of annoyance. "It's Mother Stone. Mother Earth is a human thing."

Ember pouted, scoffed a little. "Sorry, Mother *Stone*! But you all say Mother Stone took the city back, right?"

Nodding, Tyr tapped his braid beads. "Sucked it right back into the earth. Suppose it's still there, waiting to be brought back to the surface." He paused, then recited. "When worth has been found among her children profound, from out of the deep soil, rock, and fire, it shall rise again."

"Must be a mighty big hole it's in." Timothy remarked but without any poison to his words. "To hold a city so large."

"And so pretty!" Ember grinned, picturing it even as she spoke. "Gold and silver, all swirled together and—"

"Damascus." Tyr gave a knowing smile; Ember's love of the blended metal technique was well-known and he rather enjoyed how her cheeks lit up whenever they mentioned it. "Remember you asked me about it? It was made with gold and silver Damascus on the walls."

"Dwarven-made!" Helen smiled, gently grasping Ember's arm. "I don't know anyone else that could sing the song of joining two metals."

Taking the hint and sitting down, flopping down too quick for comfort on the post and wincing a tad from it, Ember nodded. She wrapped her long green sleeves up, smoothed out her skirt to be deemed appropriate. Or as appropriate as a Princess sitting on a wooden fence could be. "But strong too. They coated it in dragon scale glaze!"

Nodding, Timothy chuckled at the excitement in her voice. The sun rested in her eyes whenever she spoke on legends and tales. "So they say."

"But it didn't stay very long." Helen joined in, rather enjoying the back and forth. "For whatever reason, the earth took it back before three generations were past."

"It was a gift." Seriousness claimed Tyr's voice, hard and solid as diamond. "When gifts are abused, the giver can take them back."

Twisting about on the post, looking from one to another, Ember held out her hands, spreading her fingers as she spoke. “It was a gift to everyone—human and dwarf alike! We were supposed to live together, to work together. And for a while, they did. The city had water running through it in eternal rivers and never stopped but it came from the ground and from the sky and candles stayed alight without flame!” She heaved in a breath as she finished.

Tyr snorted in exasperation. “They had more than that.”

Interest peaked; she leaned over, resting her hands on her thighs. “Ha! See, I knew there was more to it! You dwarves tell me lots of stories, but I’ve never heard your version of this one! Why didn’t you tell me? Haven’t I earned that right?”

Setting her with a pointed stare, he said. “Because every time anyone brings up Zadkhanûn, you don’t let anyone else get a word in.” Taking a moment to consider, he added. “It isn’t always about you.”

Redness took her cheeks and she rubbed her neck. “I…don’t mean to. I just love the story so much and I love telling it.” Her eyes warmed and she looked at her dwarven friend with interest. “But if you’d tell me, I’d listen.” She took his hands, grinning so wide her cheeks ached. “I promise.”

Lips formed into a deep pout, she scowled, folded her arms and turned as Tyr thudded his fist on the post. “Is that a solid promise or a flowy one?” It was an odd dwarven phrase but simple enough to make sense of. Ember shifted, snickering as Tyr tapped a series of three knuckle digs down her spine, saying, “Solid or flowy, solid or flowy?”

Giggling under the touch which always rendered her a mess of laughs, she gently pushed at his hand. “Solid one, I—”

“She’ll do no such thing.” The thundering voice carried more weight than a trunk loaded with gold and Tyr slipped down, seeping as much as he could into the earth. Dwarves were never welcomed where that voice commanded. Every dwarf with blood in their veins knew it and feared it.

Helen and Timothy fell to one knee as the owner of the voice approached, her dress skirt swishing about her ankles. Her soldiers followed, heads high and weapons at the ready.

Ember slid off of the wooden seat, brushed her dress free of splinters and loose soil, and bowed herself. “Mother.” she said softly, all her previous energy frozen to ash.

Queen Helga was intimidating. Tall, often joked as taller than any of the men in the Kingdom, with long, flowing, brown hair and eyes cut from emeralds, she carried herself with poise and refinement. Her eyes

danced over the situation, settling their lightning on Tyr who refused to meet her gaze.

"You've enough imbecilic ideas floating about your head as it is. Including leaving the palace for this foolishness when you ought to be refining your speech and manners for this evening. I'll not have you be an embarrassment again." Snarling, pulling one lip back further than should have been humanly possible, she added. "No dwarven manners to sour our evening. If you could even claim they have any."

Tyr frowned. "I wouldn't be worried about my manners, Queen Helga—"

Ember waved her hand at him frantically, panic on her face, fear condensed in her eyes. "Mother, please. I was just—"

"Gallivanting about with peasants. I'm sure a pig farmer and his wife can teach you *so* much about courtly presentation." Setting the girl with a glare, she raised her palm and gestured her forward. "Come. I'm sure you've wasted enough of their work time as it is. I expect the wheat will be harvested on time for Lord Byron, regardless, correct?"

Timothy and Helen stayed kneeled.

"It shall, your Majesty." Helen hushed the baby on her back. "You've our word."

"Good, for all a peasant's promise is worth." She lifted her face, eyed Tyr who remained where he was, partially hidden behind a post. "It would do this dwarf well to return to his work and make his presence in this Kingdom at least useful for trade."

With a silent glance at Ember, Tyr left, slipping behind the farmhouse to access some of the well-worn tunnels.

"As you were." Helga called back as she walked off, clamping a hand tight and firm on Ember's upper arm as they went.

"Mother, they were only –"

"I am well aware what they were 'only' doing. It's bad enough to have to keep Henriette from poisoning your mind with stupid stories. Now, I find you telling them yourself? Perhaps you'd be better suited to court as a jester than an heir."

The story I was telling is your favorite! "I was—"

"You would associate with thieves and call them amusing if I were to let you." Laying a hand to her forehead as if the very act of having the conversation pained her, the Queen pulled Ember along faster than the girl could follow, forcing her to run. Even though Ember was nearly adult by their standards, the Queen still had a good foot on her in height. "Peasants are bad enough, but dwarves? I should have known keeping

you from their damn workshop wasn't enough. He'll poison your thoughts with their lies. When we find someone better at crafting, I will cast them out that very eve."

Ember didn't remark she'd be looking for a time for such a thing. "Tyr is kind, Mother. And smart. He—"

"I doubt that. Recognizing smarts is hardly something I would entrust to you." She tightened her grip a third time, ignoring the wince as her daughter resisted the curl of her nails into the girl's flesh. "I wouldn't count intelligence among your traits."

Tone dusted with the lie of concern, the Queen's contempt bled through. "He's a dwarf. They bend metal with their bare hands. They are to blame for the lack of allies and the brokenness of our country. One betrayal by them is the weight of ten by humans. They've the means to deliver pain and violence, more so than we do. All but immune to fire and crushing stone without a thought and here you are, my *brilliant* daughter, letting him pound on your neck. One quick movement…" She reached up, grabbed the girl by the loose hairs at the base of her skull, and pulled up, so hard the girl's feet went to her toes and tears broke from her eyes. "He could snap your neck like a branch."

Recovering as much as one could, Ember wheezed, her breath seeping out through her lips in a sharp exhale. "He could. But he won't."

"Awfully confident, aren't you?" A shake of the head and the heavy sigh spoke volumes. "Foolish girl."

"I *trust* him."

"Trust. You surrender to anyone capable of presenting you with a pretty gift. You *trust* him? You won't even let *me* touch your neck, if you've the choice."

Ember stayed silent. It was its own answer.



"Be mindful, my Princess."

"Don't tell me what to do! I'll do what I want and I *know* what I need to do!" Ember turned, tucked her necklace about her neck as Henriette darted about, checking her dress for loose strands and pulling the lashes tight. Yet as always, she couldn't help giving her advice.

"Mindful." Flopping down in her chair, Ember heaved a deep sigh as

Henriette came up from behind to pull the girl's hair into her tight buns, while she carefully left some of it loose so it could bounce about the girl's shoulders. "I already *know* but what am I supposed to do? How can I be mindful when Mother and Daddy are talking about welcoming a Fae? Can you tell me something *useful?"*

"That tongue of yours is going to be your downfall, Princess." As the woman worked, she advised. "Be mindful the creature you may be up against is not the same as other guests."

"I know that! It's a Fae! I've been telling you that!"

"And you need to remember you know nothing about Fae but they may well know a lot about you, my Princess."

"How would they know about me?"

"You think espionage is owned by humans? Fae are much better at it." Allowing a moment for silence, the older woman continued. "We all come from somewhere and Fae were born amid starlight. They can bend as light does when it hits water because they *are* light."

"That doesn't make sense, Henriette." The girl winced at the tightness of the buns and the woman adjusted without her needing to ask. "How can something be born from starlight? And how does that help me? You're spouting off useless trivia again." *Why can't she just focus and listen? This doesn't help!*

"How can dwarves be born of stone and how can humans be born of soil?" Henriette chuckled. "Maybe it's true, maybe it's a reflection of stories we cannot recall anymore than true sense. But the more we forget, the more it comes back to remind us. You are a grand example, dear girl, you came, in a way, from ash. Hence your name."

"Ash?" Turning in her chair, she asked. "Mother said I was a gift from the elves!" She pushed herself up and all but bloated like a storm cloud. "Henriette, don't you lie to me! I know I was born special and I came from the elves! You're comparing me to the ashes in a fire? Mind *your* tongue! I'm the Princess; I am not ash!"

"Ah. So you were." Leaning over, the woman remarked. "And it was from a potion they made for your mother to drink made of leaves, bark, water, herbs, and the ashes of a fire. The elves made her a potion to grant her the desire for a child, one 'reflecting the wonder of my kingdom.' And thus, here you came—eyes to reflect the ash, hair the bark of the trees, white skin from the herbs and berries." Warmth bubbling from the voice, Henriette stated. "Do not assume ashes mean a poor reflection on you. You were a gift."

Ember frowned. She'd never heard that version of the story. Mother

always talked about her being a gift for the Queen. This was the first she'd heard of being a reflection of the kingdom. An odd pride came with it.

"But you need to mind yourself." Henriette pointed ahead and the two of the women gazed into the small mirror, their cheeks resting close. "I see your desire to speak out, my Princess, as you always do so readily when something burns in your heart and I cannot say I argue against it. But you need to watch yourself." Her voice trailed off, looking down at Ember, her eyes settling on an old bruise upon the young woman's wrist. "The Queen grows more and more impatient."

"Mother's the same as ever. But the Fae might have something else to offer her." Looking to her left, she said. "I can't just not say something!" On this, she was most adamant. "I have to say something. No matter what Mother will do, I can't stay quiet! It's not just me it affects, Henriette!" Tyr's rebuke from earlier still stung. "I know it's not just about me."

With a sigh, Henriette nodded. "Just mind you don't cut your own neck to save another's, child. We are made from earth, as are dwarves from rock. But Fae maintain their otherworldly nature. They shift, become mist and reappear. Their words are just as dangerous. Your father might be an ally but he usually—"

"Goes along with Mother." Ember finished. With a distinct all-knowing glaze to her voice, she added. "I *know*."

"Fae are hard to beat, Princess, especially if they have a chance to take root. Even your fierceness may not be enough. Fae are stars—living, breathing bodies of starlight, of pure magic. Magic has a means of surviving until the core is rooted out. But you need a star to destroy a star."



THE EVENING PARTY turned out just as Ember had feared.

Decked out in colors, lanterns, and all manner of feast foods to welcome their guests, the grand hall was glorious to behold. Ribbons of silver and green painted the walls, swaying in the faint breeze from outside. Left clear and open, the bay windows shimmered; the curtains pulled apart, letting moonlight glisten off the silverware and the

glimmering jewels of all the noble ladies.

Ember normally was pretty fond of a nice dress. For all her adventures down into the realm of the dwarves or outside amid the woods, she loved a fancy party as much as any Princess could.

She had agreed to the traditional jewelry, grinning to herself; she would be wearing something her dwarven friends had put their touch on. Her parents need not know that; all they saw was the family silver necklace about her neck and that was all they need know.

As she took her place next to her mother in the large green upholstered throne, she cast one look to her father.

King Wilhelm was actually younger than Helga by a year or so but he didn't look it. His brown hair had gained hinges of grey in his reign and the long, bushy beard tickled so when he would kiss Ember goodnight appeared to have a shaggier appearance as of late.

He greeted his subjects tonight as he always did—with a deep smile, boisterous laugh, and his deep, brown eyes aglow.

"It does my heart good to welcome new potential friends from the Kingdom of Gralcimm. I hope they find their visit full of good cheer and hospitality!" Nodding to the minstrel by the large, oaken doors, draped in the green and silver of their family title, the unspoken order for announcement was given and Ember sat up a wee straighter.

Clearing his throat, the minstrel, looking more bone than flesh, declared. "Allow me to present, King Brutus, Queen Lilith, and Prince Lance of the Kingdom of Gralcimm and their close ally, the Fae Alyssum!"

The doors creaked open, the servants pulling them inward, straining ever so slightly against the weight. From outside, flanked by several armored knights, came the royal family of Gralcimm.

It was rare for an entire royal family to attend anything. There must have been another sibling or child left back home, Ember decided, for them to be willing to risk such a thing.

Unless they had to.

The King, the Queen, and Prince carried an air about them, a tangible sense of disdain, of self-importance, what with the jewels, the upturned faces, and the sickeningly sweet, fake smiles. Only the Prince seemed to have a dash of humility to him and he never looked ahead, as if he would rather be anywhere but here.

Good. A kindred spirit.

Eyes drawn to the far left, to the creature that had to have been their Fae companion, Ember contemplated. She'd never seen a Fae before but

she knew they were related to elves in some way and naturally would look similar but exactly how much was hard to say. Clothed from head to toe in teal, with shades of white and yellow, the Fae's face remained hidden behind a wrap of cloth. It wasn't like any outfit she had ever seen. How could they even breathe, wrapped so tightly?

"King Wilhelm, Queen Helga, dear Princess Ember." the overly confident woman spoke, her arms spread wide for all to be enthused by her presence. "We offer our thanks to your hospitality. Please accept these small gifts we bring." Stepping aside, two of their servants, crouched low with baskets between them, came forward and set them before the three royals. Stacked high with fruits of all kinds—apples, oranges, pears, pomegranates and Ember spied even a pineapple, the baskets nearly toppled over. The prospect of tasting even one of those fruits was enticing.

"Many thanks for you granting us this audience." Taking a large pear from the top of the nearest basket—it must have been at least three normal pears in size—the woman bit into it cleanly. "We will, naturally, allow any precautions you feel necessary."

Wilhelm took a deep breath and answered with a smile. "Your gracious gift is most appreciated. We have not had visitors for many years from outside kingdoms. I am pleased to find you are flourishing so well amid these difficult times."

"We are blessed to find allies to help us through the darkest of times."

War. There had been no shortage of it as of late, Ember knew this all too well. Her father's stress levels usually reflected how violent the landscape was. She was not privy to intimate details but she didn't necessarily need to be in order to grasp the impact.

But if war was dominating everything, how could they have this much fresh fruit? Especially something like pineapple? And how had it not spoiled in the harsh winter that had settled in our world?

"If you're dealing with war like we are, how do you have so much fruit?" Ember's tone carried long with dark contempt. "Doesn't really sound like you are struggling to me. So, I'd say you don't understand us at all."

"Ember!" The Queen's voice hid her anger under aghast, the quiver to the vowels. "Apologize right now!"

"No." The audience gave her protection. "If there's nothing wrong with it, they won't mind answering, will they?"

"Of course not. We owe our success to our dear friend." Queen Lilith turned, holding a hand out to the creature cloaked in colors.

Ember's challenge went unanswered and she cursed under her breath for it.

After a moment, a hand emerged from the folds of cloth and accepted Queen Lilith's outstretched hand. It was hard to see much detail, but from what Ember could see, it was pale, cold, and white. "Don't be shy! Come out and let them see!"

The hand reached up and pushed the green tied fabric from their head, freeing a face.

"So, that's what a Fae looks like?" Ember sat up a little taller, ignoring the censuring glare from her mother. "Not very impressive."

The Fae in answer took a low bow, ignoring the jab. "Fae indeed I am. Forgive my caution. I am far too used to having to withdraw from sight."

"You look like an elf." She was fully aware such a statement carried the potential for explosion in it, but it was true. Elves were tall with long, pointed ears and fingers, large eyes, and long hair with darkly-tinted skin.

This creature had pointed ears and long fingers but smaller eyes, so dark brown they nearly looked black. Skin was pale, but not so pale to be sickly. Tiny runes in green shades were sparkling around their wrists and fingers, tracing up to the shoulder it looked like, but it was hard to see where it ended. The hair, cropped short at the shoulder and nearly as dark as the eyes, bounced when they moved and seemed to writhe when they didn't, never staying the same length from one minute to another.

When they smiled at her, it felt false.

"Unfortunate family resemblance, Princess." The voice was hard to place, but if Ember were to bet, she would say it was female. "We broke from them long ago but I fear I shall always carry some traits. Understanding from Queen Lilith is a dear gift to me."

"My daughter meant you no offense." Queen Helga spoke and set her daughter with a stern gaze, threat of violence contained in the eyes and the grinding of her nails into the girl's palm was a promise of it. "I am sure her curiosity merely was faster than her tongue could catch. A common failing she possesses."

"Failing is open to debate." Ember swallowed, the tightening of her mother's nails mimicking the invisible noose on her neck. "I call it being cautious."

The creature laughed, a sound shimmering like the ring of metal bells in a cool morning. Ember had the distinct feeling she could have fallen asleep to it. "No matter, no matter. I come with nothing but good tidings." With another step forward, the Fae removed three fruits from

the baskets, did a light flip forward to land on one knee before the three royal family members, holding them out as a peace offering. “I come to spread the prosperity, my friends and I,—though we are truly more family now than anything.” She gave a glance to the three visitors and even the Prince responded with a smile in kind. “Felt it was an excellent opportunity to extend our successes. I hear you are in need of textiles, craftsmanship, and the like? Is that not so?”

You couldn’t come close to what we have with the blessings of all the Gods.

“You’ve been misinformed. We’re fine with those.” Ember said, her voice cracking the air. “I doubt you could match it.”

“Daughter.” King Wilhelm’s voice left no room for argument and even his patience seemed at its limits. “We will grant them an audience before we make any final decisions. Just because things appear fine now does not mean we cannot improve upon them. Am I clear?”

Frustration boiled in her bones, but Ember knew her limits. With a light, airy sigh expected of most in her position, she offered. “Understood, Father. Lady Alyssum, my apologies.” With a nod to the three visitors, she said. “And to you as well. I fear I am rather fond of my current workers and dread to…remove them.”

King Brutus approached and she found him to be significantly more appealing than his wife. Nothing really natural about her but there was genuineness in his eyes. “Your devotion is admirable, lovely Princess. I do feel you and my son suffer from a similar affliction of affection for those whose talents improve all our lives. All we ask is you hear us out. I think you will be impressed with what Alyssum will offer.”

Ember nodded but did not trust herself to speak. All he said made sense and the warmth in his voice reminded her of the simplistic times by the fire when her father’s laughter didn’t drop down with responsibility and uncertainties. The sunlight in his words flooded her body, yet she didn’t let herself be swept away. “We’ll listen. I make no other promises.”

“She’ll make no promises at all.” The Queen’s voice ripped through her clenched teeth. “She carries no authority, regardless of what she thinks.”

“Enough.” The King’s voice allowed no argument and both Ember and her mother fell silent. “Now, Queen Lilith, you were saying?”

“Oh, you will be astounded.” Queen Lilith smiled, stepping forward to stand next to the Fae. “Alyssum has opened our eyes to so many things.”

Helga remarked, “To what do we owe the extension of this

opportunity?"

Ember exhaled mentally at the statement. At least her mother was starting to share her cynicism. Or, at the very least, was faking it well.

Alyssum's face seemed to glow. The light did hum about her, like Henriette had stated, but it was like water droplets upon the skin and hair. It rolled and caught the air, but it was not internal. It was without warmth. "I have seen so much growth in their kingdom. I wish for them to continue to be successful and while I must admit to not knowing as much about humans as I would like—and I am trying to change that—connection is the one common factor I have found. We offer textiles, crafts, and food. You have impressive arts, weaponry and armor."

King Brutus added. "Please, allow us this evening to show you what we have to offer in exchange for open alliance. You need not decide anything tonight but we ask only for some of your time."

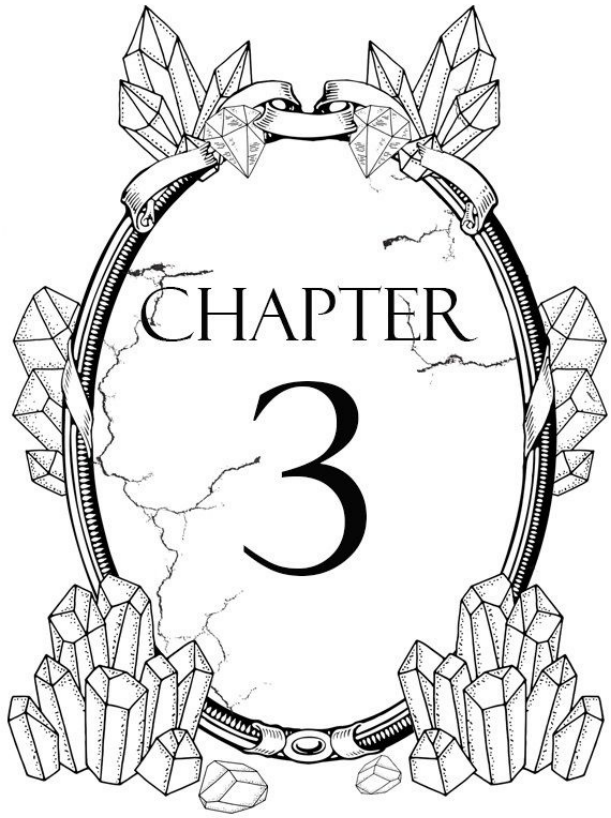
"You shall have it. We are flattered by your compassion." Helga looked down at the Fae in front of her, still holding fruit out in offering. She took the two apples in Alyssum's left hand and bit into them both. For a moment, the room seemed to hold its breath. While poisoning a royal was certainly a possibility, it seemed to be a risky move, even for magical creatures.

After a time, the Queen smiled. "If your textiles are half as good as the fruits you grow, I am intrigued to see what you have in store." She passed one of the apples to her daughter and spoke to her directly. "Do not be rude, child. You're hardly worth the trouble to try to poison."

Taking the fruit in hand, Ember rolled it. The skin was bright green, shimmering under the candlelight. There was glossiness to the outer layers that felt almost inhumane. A sense of otherworldliness. How could anything grown have such intense color, such crisp feeling and rich scent? She could smell the sweetness even without a single bite.

Yet, her stomach churned. Her fingers trembled.

But with a close of her eyes, as if she were hiding from a monster invisible to all but her, teeth broke the skin, juice ran down her chin, and she ate.



Prince Lance at least proved productive to speak with.

Ember remained unsold regarding his parents and less so still regarding the Fae; she refused to use her name even in her mind unless it was necessary but Prince Lance seemed more reasonable and open to discussion. Political talk was not his forte, which suited her fine, as it was not hers either. Nothing but fancy lies on top of false promises designed to entice shaky debts.

She preferred real talk.

The best way to get that seemed to be through Lance.

"So, she just…showed up one day?"

The two heirs had fallen in step behind their parents as they paraded their way through the halls of the castle, showing off this and that and engaging in talk strictly designed to make people feel better about one

another without revealing much at all about their own insecurities. It was a bunch of flattery and smoke, nothing more.

Lance was more than willing to give truly useful information.

"Yeah, about a year ago." Lance carried himself with pride now without the shadow of his parents and confidence was something Ember knew well. "I found her with Sir Günter and Sir Hans, drifting about in the fields by the farmers, without a single care."

"And that didn't seem odd?" She paused. Dipping down, she laid her fingers in the fur of a wolf hound trotting next to her. Her loyal dog, Chester, while banned from the main hall during meetings, rushed to her side as soon as the doors opened. Settling between her and the visitors, a physical statement of protection, the animal kept his teeth at short command.

"So…the Fae just showed up one day?" She repeated the words, as if to see if she'd heard them correctly. *What kind of normal did his kingdom have? People don't just appear in fields without any reason.*

"Oh, quite odd. She was just there…but seemed like she always was." Lance stopped and took hold of Ember lightly by the shoulder. Sir Jacob, never far from her side, put his hand to his sword hilt, young as the Prince was.

"Remove your hands from my Princess."

A hint of flattery and pride fluttered in her chest. There was something endearing about people willing to spring to her defense, even if it was in their job description. Jacob had always been the quintessential hero in both sight and voice. Not quite old enough to be her father, an older brother role he had nearly filled, save moments like this when her life was deemed above his.

Bad as it might have been, the sense of importance it gave her was impossible to ignore and she gave a light smirk when Lance paled and removed his palm. One of the guards by his side mirrored Jacob's gesture and for a moment, the room hovered in tension as the two knights set one another with looks of unmoving devotion, barely contained.

Ember lingered in it for a moment. Selfish maybe but impossible to resist.

"It's okay." she said, laying a hand on Jacob's wrist. "It's fine."

After leveling a dark look at the Prince, used carefully with noticeable caution towards the opposing knights, Jacob removed his hand from his hilt.

Lance gave a nod to his own guards and after an identical pause, they

returned to relaxed posture.

"Sorry. I should have known better than to grab you. I'll say this for your guards: they're loyal. Even now, they look at you and you know you're all that matters in their world."

"Yours too." Ember redirected, taking soft steps forward, closing in on the now elongated distance between them and their parents. "But what were you saying? About it being weird? About it being like she was always there?"

"Perhaps weird is too harsh a word but it was odd, to be sure." Lance pursed his lips. Emotion colored his face, shining from his eyes and illuminating from his skin but it was impossible to place the feeling. Not quite uncomfortableness or fear, nor the rather frantic impulse of anger. A trapped mask overtook his face, as if caught in-between one thought and another and swept away.

"Fae aren't something we dealt with often. We've had our share but they usually are tricksters, always wanting a joke or prank. Or, in the best of cases, they feel the need to praise themselves so much it's all you can do to keep up with their mouths being all flaps."

Pinching her mouth tight, Ember lifted her head, eyes diverted. So far, Lance had proven to be more agreeable than most she had the misfortune of discussing politics with, but she could tell, given he had a rather dismissive attitude with Fae, things were going to become complicated. "Fae have never been welcome here. Not for a long time anyway. Maybe we attract the crueler types. They always caused famine, disease, even murders here. No child stealing from Fae in your kingdom?"

A notable gasp erupted from the guards from Gralcimm. Prince Lance rubbed his head, a low wince coating his face.

"Oh, surely you gest. You can't be serious. You're not serious, are you?"

Anger bloomed. Heat and red took Ember's face and eyes narrowed to tight slits. "I don't joke about *that*. What do you take me for?!"

"Forgive us." one of the guards—was it Hans or Elias—said. "We mean no disrespect, Princess, but we fear you've been misinformed. Fae have never been behind the child kidnappings, but we also made the mistake believing it for so many years. Believe me, when I promise you, Fae may be tricky and full of spice but they are not so cruel and cold."

"Indeed! Cruel? A Fae to be deliberately malicious?" Prince Lance laughed out loud and amid snorting and gasping, attempted to garner his control. Little good it did; the boy was almost doubled over and as

soon as their Prince did so, the guards followed. “It’s the stuff of drunkards’ stories and children’s nightmares!”

Heat flooded her face, yet not in embarrassment. Embarrassment indicated a fear of judgement and with the exception of her parents, Ember gave little weight to what others thought of her.

Anger was her fire.

“You say no disrespect yet you laugh at me?” Her nails dug into her palms with an intensity matched by her clenched jaw. “I do not accept your request for forgiveness!”

Perhaps it was the ferocity in her voice, rumbling through the hall as if it were alive, but the Prince and his gathered guards tumbled back to politeness rather quickly.

“Please, please.” Lance held his hands up, as if trying to hold off a wind he could neither see nor sense. “Princess, I beseech you, I meant no harm to you or to insult your kingdom!”

Does he take me for a fool? He’s one to be making accusations!

There was a time for decorum and a time for aggression. Ember’s mind was solid in its decision; decorum no longer had a place. Lance had made the first shot; she’d gladly return it!

“And why should I give any attention to what you have to say?” She stalked close to him, giving no mind to the guards by his side, waiting with fingers poised barely above their hilts, and for her, there was no one else but her and Lance within the room.

The air between her and him crackled with the heat of her ire.

“You stand here, within my Kingdom and preach at me about how I don’t know the pains my people have suffered at Fae hands? You’ve the nerve of a lion but the wit of a slug!” Her hands ground tight into fists. “Have you spent a sliver of time with *your* people to even *know* if they were suffering?”

Twisting on her heels, her skirts fluttering at her ankles, Ember spat her words out, poison dripping off every syllable, as she went. “Maybe your Fae haven’t tormented your people but ours have. Dead children, missing children. Failed crops. You say it doesn’t happen, but I bet if I asked your people I would get a different answer. You smell like you’ve never left court. Don’t sit there and tell me these things don’t happen. They do. Do not preach my kingdom’s woes to me!”

Chester gave a low growl at the gathered assembly but trotted after his mistress down the hall. Jacob swiftly moved to follow and match her pace, leaving their guests behind, scattered and frazzled. Prince Lance called after her twice until it was quite apparent she had no intention of

answering.

When they were a good way from the group, Sir Jacob said. “Milady, you defend yourself with passion.”

“But?” She asked, no preamble in her tone. She knew a hidden critique when she heard one. She’d practically grown up hearing it from her mother, the light softening of the verbal blows from her father lost their effectiveness over the years until he no longer bothered at all. Turning her face to the older but kind face of Jacob, she kept up her pace. “But what?”

“You know me well,” he said with a light smile. “Perhaps, you should have listened to his full explanation.”

“Why?” Folding her arms in a huff, she tossed her head. “Why should I when they assumed I was an idiot that doesn’t know my own Kingdom?” Inwardly, she heard Tyr’s prompting in her head. Fleeing from her mother’s presence like a common criminal. If the Fae was successful, was that going to be all-encompassing?

Stop the Fae. And quickly.

Yet, an itch in the back of her mind also said she was the Princess who she knew all too well the duties of an heir.

But hadn’t she come into this with the plan to sabotage the alliance? She had been so solid in her justification, earlier. Rock solid, even.

Yet, her mind tumbled and rattled, loose strands amid a torn rein that would give way to a fall. Her thoughts were cloudy, muddy, as if focusing on something for too long was simply beyond comprehension.

Did she not want to please her parents? Make them proud? To not be regarded as the one who making political wars? To not be the one that people had to clean up after—wasn’t that what she wanted? Hadn’t she wanted nothing more than for her mother to smile at her, with genuine affection? Like she must have once, when her mind was too young to remember?

Can you do nothing right? Wasn’t that the universal response to anything she did?

What if she did something right, for once?

But right by whom?

Someone declaring something is right does not make it so any more than proclaiming sandstone to be gold gives it value.

An old dwarven saying. She would hear it said all the time, Friga loved to repeat it—

“Princess?”

Huffing, Ember remarked. “I know I should, but I don’t want to. And

if I don't want to, I don't have to."

As was his way, Jacob was quiet. The tap of their feet against the tiled floor rang solitary for a long time. Her eyes drifted to the halls, ignoring any attempt at conversation and Jacob, bless him, didn't try.

The more she walked, emotions stilled and calmed. Silence was good for contemplation. Muddy thoughts, the conversations with her mother, the censures of her father, the false smiles, they all faded.

Frowning, her fingers glossed over the necklace around her neck, relishing in the cool metal against her fingers. As water against hot skin, it soothed and her mind calmed.

Perhaps it was her imagination, after all, she was well known for losing herself in the clouds, but the further they slipped from the throne room, thinking became clear.

Was it cruel for her to make assumptions?

Maybe. But there was too much uncertainty, her mind screamed about her being a fool. Her heart wept for the lies she knew must be coating every speck of this meeting. Her gut screamed.

The Fae…was she up to something? Most definitely.

The muddiness, the confusion. All telltale signs of Fae magic. Yet, why did she seem to be alone in recognizing the symbols? Her parents were many things but not fools. At least, she did not think them to be. Yet, here they were, not too far ahead, absolutely lapping up everything these visitors had to say.

Her mother looked one step away from offering the Fae a title of authority.

Well, if her parents were in no position to defend their people, then it would fall to her. Keeping their interests at forefront and her own mind sharp became priority and she called upon the fire she had unleashed at Lance to stiffen her heart and sharpen her tongue.

If the Fae ensnared her family, it would not have her.

"Not me." Tightening her arms around herself, she pressed ahead, leaving Jacob jobbing to catch up. "Not my Kingdom."



"WITH SUCH OFFERINGS, we will be Zadkhanûn reborn! You spoil us, friends."

Friends? Already? We barely know them, Mother. Can you not see how they're playing you? Or do you want them to?

"Hardly." Queen Lilith slipped from right to left, her feet caressing the stone beneath her as she walked from her gathering to stand in front of the three royals again. "I know any alliances are shaky discussions and it was the least we could do to show our sincerity."

Sincerity…

"Princess, might we present you with an offering?"

Lance stepped forward, hands clasped together. "I assure you, I didn't mean to disrespect you during our conversation earlier. I'm…not the best at conversation."

One of the nearby guards set a hand on the boy's shoulder then looked at her. "I would dare say you were more than patient, Prince Lance. And yet, here you are, offering what condolences you can offer, despite it. Despite the rather…caustic response of the Princess."

Ember's face stayed stoic. Stirring of emotion gathered in her belly. Lance held himself so small, like a wounded bird trying to huddle under the shelter of its mother's wing.

Maybe she should have felt bad. He hadn't exactly been cruel with his questions, just dismissive. Prideful, perhaps. Yet, there'd been no malice. But whether it was deliberate or simple stupidity, she wasn't sure.

Wouldn't be the first time impulsivity caused her shame and misstep. Wasn't that her nature?

Or maybe it was what they wanted her to feel and think?

While Queen Lilith slathered her words with honey and silk, Ember drifted her eyes, from one visitor to the other. Seeking what she couldn't say.

The group was an odd one, that much was certain but they seemed normal, as far as one could tell. Lance admitted to the appearance of the Fae being odd, but with the circumstances being unknown.

Seemed Jacob was proven right yet again.

She could stand to just shut up and listen sometimes.

"Daughter?" The King's voice cut through her mind, with all the thunder of authority granted to a king. His powerful hand settled on her shoulder.

Weariness, confusion, and frustration bled off her like an old scent, lingering beyond its welcomed time. Here she was thinking she ought to take advice and listen more often but wasn't even listening because her mind was elsewhere.

Regroup, reground, and respond. Yes, yes, it was all she could do

right now.

Daddy was standing at her left, Mother at her right. Nothing beyond their lips but they need not speak to get their point across.

Stand, apologize, and make amends.

The ruggedness in her father and the *tap-tap-tap* of her mother's longest nail on the necklace said all that it needed to get such a message to Ember's ears.

Duty pulled her to her feet.

"King Brutus, Queen Lilith, Prince Lance." She tilted her head to them each in turn. "My apologies if I gave you the wrong impression. I meant nothing more than to protect my people."

She meant it. She meant every word of it. Little secret from years of dealing with ridiculous court politics. If she had to stretch the truth, start with an actual truth. Much easier to pretend.

King Brutus gave her a smile, one both similar and dissimilar to the warmth she felt after a filling meal and collapsing upon her bed with the music of Henriette's stories in her ears.

"Your devotion is admirable, little Princess Ember. I am sure life has taught you the necessity of caution but we bring nothing but good faith."

Frowning both at the infantile nickname and the situation, she pondered.

The King had stumbled as he spoke. Not a full on pause but a stumble, brief and deliberate. As if lost for a moment, trying to find footing.

Come to think of it, Prince Lance had done something similar, as had Queen Lilith. But no one, not even her mother, who was a stickler for proper speech edict raised so much as an eye!

And here again! Was she the only one seeing it?!

Unnerved as she was, the flow of demureness did not stop to fiddle with an enigma.

Prince Lance stood firm and tall, taking a step to be in stride with his father. "Please, let us offer a gift as a symbol of our sincerity."

A gift?

Damn.

Many things were easy to maneuver in court politics even if doing so did not make one the most likable of sorts. Certain elements were understandable, even if they were not advantageous for all parties involved. Rules of diplomacy carved themselves from stone and rock—they cut and weighed and bruised, dependent on the needs of the moment, not the emotion of those involved.

Gifts were one of those unspoken rules. To refuse a gift, regardless of its usefulness to the user, carried the ability to sever an alliance, to call upon war and with the most minimal damage, darken your reputation which, one needed when running a kingdom.

In short, it was the longest form of royal suicide.

Wait…didn't she *want* that?

She wrung her hands as her mind rumbled.

Legs with the strength of dampened leaves, Ember grasped the front of her dress and descended the small steps from her throne to be on level with their guests. As she settled on the carpet, dark green, covering the stone floor, she let her dress loose again, the folds of fabric effectively hiding her feet. Slipping her feet loose from her shoes, the rough texture of the stone, just outside the plush carpets, was grounding.

"I am honored." she said, head high and eyes directed ahead to their guests. Emotion still bubbled within her but she kept her gaze firm.

Queen Lilith smiled and turned to their Fae ally who was all but swimming through the air on the way over, a large wrapped item gathered in her hands. Ember doubted she could have lifted it; it was at least twice as tall as she was and nearly just as wide. The pale yellow cloth hiding it from view wavered even after it had been set on the ground with a loud clang.

"I know you have reservations." the Fae's voice trembled. Whispering through the air, her voice crept and slid over skin as if it were alive. The Fae pulled on the cloth, just enough to reveal silver, clawed feet. "Please, allow us to put those reservations to rest and offer our apologies for any missteps. This is a delicate situation. I pray we can set your worries at ease."

With that statement, she stepped back and whisked the cloth away, arms flung wide as if the greatest of all artworks waited before them.

"How beautiful!" Her mother's voice heightened, in that ridiculous tone she took on whenever the latest fad was thrown at her feet. Without even looking in her direction, Ember knew the greedy sparkle had taken the Queen's eyes.

"What craftsmanship! Of all the things you have shown us tonight, this is truly the grandest." Her father cleared his throat and she knew it was meant for her. "Is it not, Daughter?"

She slipped forward, her bare feet slipping over the cold stone as she walked. Her mother made some comment about 'really, you couldn't keep them on for a few moments more?' but her focus was not on that but on the gift presented before her.

A large, oval mirror, white as the diamonds Mother wore in her hair, yet with a sheen colored more the shade of dusted silver, carved into tight designs and figures from head to foot. Ember stretched her fingers out and ran the tips down the carvings she was tall enough to touch.

They were intricate. Details as small as scales on the fins of what had to be mermaids and feathers atop the heads of griffins and even the tiny cuts within the branches indicating the dragon's claws sparkled and shimmered, the light from the lanterns catching them with a spark.

Smiles and bright eyes gazed at her from the images, a mist of optimism and hope so thick she felt her throat close at it. Breathing was both difficult and mindless all in one motion.

"It's…so well done." She said after a moment's delay.

Warmth spread through the room amid clapping and similar praises. Her father was talking about open alliance and her mother was asking whom she might inquire about getting a similar mirror for herself.

Art was a reflection of the artist, wasn't it?

No. Where had that come from? Art could be from an artist's heart or it could be the deepest and dankest depth of imagination.

How could this have been made with anything but the deepest depth of the heart?

Shaking her head back and forth so harshly her hair clips nearly came undone to spiral across the room, Ember clamped her teeth on the air, as if trying to force it into her lungs as one swallowed fistfuls of food after a famine. Slipping her hands up to rest on her throat, maybe as a subconscious attempt to massage her muscles into relaxing so she might breathe normally again, the tips of her nails brushed the necklace pressed smooth on her chest.

The mercy of being caught beneath the unforgiving summer sun as the sky turned grey with such ferocity she would lose her sense of direction and glance about seeking the hand of Gods cast upon the ground.

The sharpness when water doused a parched throat.

The brilliant flood of clarity when light erupted from a wick and the shadow fled from its warmth.

Ember's eyes expanded, her pupils enlarged as truth flooded her mind.

No longer did the mirror's carving carry anything but cruelty. Those smiles and eyes were twisted and narrowed, cruelty and malice dripped from their every edge. Light laughter, so low it must have been forged into the metal itself, resonated in her ears but it traveled there by touch

not sound.

Jerking her hand from the mirror's edge, Ember wheezed, as if she had been running about for hours on end. Looking down at the fingertips touching the metal, she shuddered, her skin crawling with revulsion. Dirty, cold, and violated—she felt all three at once and grasped her fingers unto her necklace, as a child would cling to a parent to cast away the shadows of the mind that invaded at night.

The cool metal acted as a balm, soothing away the inner burn.

"Daughter."

Turning, she found the entire room had cast their eyes upon her. Her father, hand clasp tight in King Brutus', gave her his expectant look.

What to do? What to say? The mere thought of having such a thing anywhere near her was nausea-inducing. She took a step back subconsciously.

Oh, look at the smug face. Ember scowled, not outwardly; at the smile that Fae wore, as if she had won the right to waltz through the treasury and cherry pick at her whim.

And couldn't she? She'd all but been given the key! Mother and Daddy were being robbed in broad daylight and smiling through it all. As if they were glad of it!

Not her. Consequences be damned, Princess Ember would *not* stand by and let this pass with no trial.

But careful she would need to be. If not because of her mother, then because of the Fae. Henriette had been right, they were a dangerous enemy.

"It's unlike anything I've seen before." *Remember, the best lie is based in truth*. "I hardly have anything to match it—"

"No need, dear Princess." Queen Lilith's teeth shone amid the low light as her lips upturned. "It was the idea of our dear friend. Please, think nothing of it."

Now, she truly did not trust it.

"But I must." Ember pressed, taking a step closer to the gathered group, casting her arms into a wide gesture. "Please, could I offer a tale to demonstrate my feelings?"

Prince Lance blinked, surprised. "You tell stories?"

King Wilhelm chuckled, his barrel chest rumbling. "Oh, my daughter would tell stories all day if the God of Tales would permit." His eyes warmed as an evening fire. "She puts Him to shame."

"So, may I bless you with one now? I think a simple thank you would be insufficient." She closed her eyes and tried to look upon them, even

the Fae with the same warm gaze her mother used. It felt wrong, deceitful, but apparently, effective as the gathered group retreated to the nearest chairs and King Brutus clapped.

"If you insist so much, dear Princess. Please." Casting his arm toward the open floor, he added. "I am intrigued to see what tale you might spin for us if you are as well learned as your father insists."

Settling her eyes on the Fae again specifically, she saw it again—that smug, almost arrogant, look glossed over with the falsity of niceness. Sickness took Ember's stomach, but she pushed it down and took her position amid the center, her bare feet still gliding about the rough stones.

"Once, when the world was still young and these grand palaces were but mere dreams of our ancestors, there lived the King Koft, a young and enthusiastic king. He'd taken the throne young, well before his twentieth year, when his father fell in battle."

She waited, letting the words sink into the room.

"Kind he was, but not very wise. The world had not yet taught him all the lessons he had to learn, and for all his efforts, his people suffered. Food was scarce as the grass eating bugs—far larger than the locusts we face today—had come as if celebrating his father's death. But give up, he would not!"

From stone to stone she walked, slipping to her tiptoes as she made her way about the circle, stopping briefly at each member of her audience.

"Far and wide, he searched and searched for aid. From kingdom to peasant, with nothing to show for it save the anger of his people and the cry of hungry children." Hanging her head, she put a hand to her forehead, as if she too were weighed down with such troubles.

Not so much a falsehood.

"Then, one day, as he patrolled the very edge of his kingdom, he came upon an odd character, clothed in rags but with long hair, green as the morning moor and eyes of amethyst."

"A Fae?" Prince Lance interrupted. Remembering himself a half moment later, his hand went over his mouth.

Ember nodded. "Aye. A Fae. 'What troubles you, milord?' the Fae asked. Wary, the man answered, 'I come seeking a cure for the pests that have reduced my people's crops to dust and have left their stomachs bare. Fae, I am sure you are for your eyes cannot hide it, do you have any means to offer me? I would pay handsomely.'"

Stopping, Ember cast a look at the mirror again. A final look, a final

check for herself. While too far from it to see the details, it wasn't necessary. Frost crept up her spine as readily as if she had been cast amid the blizzard winds.

She went on.

"The Fae answered the King, 'Yes, indeed I am and magic true I possess. But tell me, King, what would you have to offer a Fae whom has no use for money or gem?' Now, this was a hard question and the King sat still and quiet in thought for a long time. 'You ask a good inquiry, dear Fae, for indeed there is not much I can offer. But I will give unto you any patch of land within my territory you desire. Be it bush or branch or body of water, you need but name it if you can bring my people relief.'"

Slumped forward, hands upon their thighs as they listened, her audience breathed light, entranced with her words. Ember possessed a talent for speech few could match, one reason courtly manners were pressed so harshly on her. She'd the will and ability to command a room and she wielded it here as an expert musician could conjure tears with a pluck of string.

"Now to this, the Fae took little time to respond. 'You offer an honest deal, King. Any body within your realm is mine to pick as I would?' 'Indeed, indeed, if you can offer me relief for my people.'"

Queen Lilith sighed, a heavy but content sound. "So much like us. So lost we were and we are blessed for our Alyssum's arrival."

Muttered agreement continued a moment before silence reigned and Ember began again.

"To this, the Fae and King Koft were in agreement. To a far field the King was led and there were swarms of the most brightly-colored lights as you would see, numerous as the stars. The Fae said unto him, 'They will follow us back and cast your problem to the winds, harmless as dust. Everything unwanted will become soil and dirt and sand.' Oh, how ecstatic the King was he nearly ran the entire way back, slowing enough to see their salvation followed. And indeed, the Fae did as promised. Upon arrival, the lights caught each pest, as neatly as we might draw fish from a stream. It took nary any time at all and as promised, into dust they turned.'"

Quiet remained as Ember took a moment to catch her breath and observe her surroundings. She'd been pacing back and forth, but now she stood with her back to the main hall doors and audience members on either side.

"'My task has been done,' said the Fae. 'And I will now take my prize.' Oh, but what a surprise took King Koft when he looked about and

saw his own flesh turning cracked and coarse, crumbling away as if caught in wild winds. 'What is this?' He demanded. 'What have you done?!' Even as he spoke, his voice became sand in his throat and his last sight before all life fled him was of the Fae looking remarkably like himself. 'What have I done?' the Fae asked as his voice mirrored the King's. 'I have taken what I was offered. Anybody within your kingdom, you agreed. I choose yours. And as you—I deem what is unwanted.' The last remains of King Koft—the true King Koft—blew away with the sunset."

Twirled about on her ankles, ignoring the muffled gasps and utter rage she saw about her mother's face, Ember directed her ire at the Fae.

"I'm young but not an idiot. I see what you're doing and I'll have no part in it. Your good intentions are a farce."

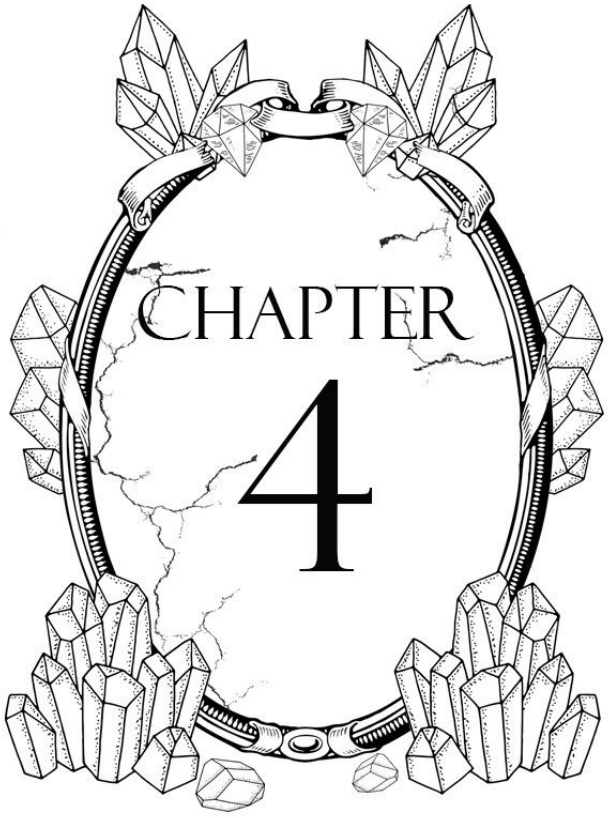
"Ember!"

"You've cast some glamor over everyone here."

"Princess Ember!"

"But you'll not have me. If my mother and father won't see it, then I'll warn the people myself!"

Before anyone could utter another word, Ember shifted to the door and fled.



"Psst!"

Hiding herself as best she could under the window, tucked from sight by barrels, loose hay, and a basket full of grain, Ember waited.

"Who's there?"

The voice was hardly welcoming, harsh and scratchy, like sand worn down from abuse. For Ember, it was exactly what she wanted to hear. Standing up, she popped her head into view of the window. "Miss Emery!"

POW!

Pain, sharp and sudden, rushed through her body, fast and swift, all center within her left eye. Stumbling, both from pain and surprise, Ember's hands shot to cover the offended part of her face and cursed

through her clenched teeth. “Death’s Ice!”

Half a breath later, fingers were clutching her arm, old and pointed nails cutting her skin ever so slightly. “Princess! Oh, dear Goddess of Mercy, forgive me!”

Opening her good eye, Ember’s vision blurred for a moment, before settling on the form of Emery, the target of her seeking.

An older woman with ten years more experience than physical months, Emery was the self-proclaimed hermit of the kingdom. Hair always bound in a messy, brown bun, hands chapped with scars and face in a perpetual frown, Ember sometimes forgot there had been a time when the woman smiled. It had been a great many years yet Ember valued her presence because much like the dwarves, it came with no preamble or lie.

Exactly what she needed right now.

“Get in here, you little minx; let me tend that eye!”

There was no request in that statement, as was Emery’s way. She seemed to have little tact. Supposedly, she’d not always been so, but for all long as Ember knew her, she’d been sharp and coarse.

Slipping first one leg then another over the window frame, Ember made her way inside, grinning at the barking dogs as she always did. “Hey, Shadow! Hey, Goldie!”

The two large, slobbering piles of black and yellow fur pounced, shedding a significant amount of fur upon her dress and left when they had received a sufficient number of pats and one scratch, minimum, each. The soft touch of fur and friendly hounds cooled her beating heart. Trotting off, the dogs flopped down next to the pigs and sheep.

Emery returned, a wet rag in hand and pulled Ember’s hands from her eye with more force than was necessary. “Well, damn.” Ember withheld her wince as the woman jolted her head to and fro for a moment more before slapping the dripping cloth into her hand. “Put that on it. Might still swell but it’ll help the pain if nothin’ else.”

“Than—”

“What business you got sneakin’ up on people in the dead of night? You’re lucky I didn’t chuck a knife your way, girl!”

“You wouldn’t.” Rubbing the rag onto her face, enjoying the coolness of the water, Ember lifted her nose up in confidence. “Can’t afford to lose any of your knives, you say.”

“No one likes a snarky guest.” The woman said, turning her back on her, turning to tend her animals. There was spilled slop on the dirt floor, a consequence of the princess’ sudden appearance.

Ember winced, feeling her stomach twist. Not necessarily because of the content—she'd seen her fair share of pig slop—but because of how much Emery tried not to waste it. She scrapped every bit back in, then pressed the floor to make sure she hadn't missed anything.

The girl's heart hurt. She was the Princess. She lived in luxury while her subjects lived like this? Her father and mother surely had the means to improve these lives. Why didn't they?

"I came to ask your advice, Miss Emery," she said simply.

"My advice? What could an old, peasant woman offer you, huh?"

"You're not that old," came the immediate response. "You just look old."

Perhaps she earned that look.

"Your flattery needs help."

"..right." She'd heard that several times. "But I do want to talk to you."

"Why me?"

The only heat in the room, from the tiny lamps and dying hearth, was sucked from the air. The shadows of night fell heavy amid the inquiry and Ember fiddled with her rag a moment, considering her approach. She'd rushed off with this destination in mind but her nerves returned facing it.

Emery was the woman who'd lost her daughter to a Fae changeling. When asked, the peasant woman always said it was the look in the eyes that gave it away. Emery had thrust it away from her breast; it had turned shadows to living things, delaying its pursuit as it rushed for the safety of the dark wood. Emery had taken after it, stumbling and screaming, despite birthing the child a mere two days before. She'd lost the Fae at the entrance of the woods and Ember would remember her broken face until the day she died. The pleas, the sobs, and the way her Father's soft apologies, empty promises and payment of gold did nothing to ease them.

She couldn't let this keep happening. And if things continued as they were in the palace, it would happen more.

"Because you understand how dangerous a Fae is."

Rigidity took the woman's body. Even hunched over as she was, her limbs went taut, as if struck by lightning. She turned, slowly, eyes wide. Voice pinched, somewhere between sobbing and screaming, she said. "What about Fae?"

Sighing heavily, Ember said. "Mother and Daddy are trying to strike a deal with a neighboring kingdom. They have a Fae ally. I'm doing what

I can to stop it but if I can't, you have a right to be warned."

"A Fae ally? Fae lie. They steal, they cheat."

"I know. But Mother likes the gifts they bring." Scoffing, blowing her hair upward, Ember slumped. "I've tried to get her to see beyond it but Mother—"

"The Queen sees what she wants to see. And the Fae will lock onto it. Weakness is their specialty." Body seeming to crumble, she eyed the Princess. "What of the King?"

Ember shook her head. "Just as entranced. Best word I can think of. They just…took everything they said like it was fact. That's not like Daddy. Not about things like this."

Emery didn't say anything, but the acknowledgement gleamed on her face. After a long pause, she said, eyes still barely moving. "Why didn't you fall for it?"

Much as Ember might want to say she was too smart for that, it wasn't so simple. Her parents were both older and wiser than her, much as she might like to think otherwise at times, and they had fallen under sway so easily.

"I don't know." She thought, rubbing her fingers together, a nervous tic she'd acquired as a young girl. "I was in the same room, ate the same food, heard the same things."

Emery paced still, back and forth, her animals forgotten. Tension bled from every orifice and with each step, she would gaze at the Princess, as if looking for a sign, a symbol, or anything.

"The King and Queen will move forward with it?"

"I think they will. I've done what I can and I'll continue to do what I can, but they're exchanging gifts and that never happens unless a deal is almost set." Ember frowned. "What else can I do?"

"Why are you asking me?" Darkness flooded from the woman's eyes. "Because I've lost a daughter to a Fae so I should know?"

Wincing, Ember shook her head, harshly. "I…I know you lost Hannah. And I wish I could undo it."

As when a candle was lit and the shadows fled from it, the sour look upon Emery's face likewise faded. "You remember her name?" Shock colored her words.

"Of course. I know I was little when it happened, but I never forgot it. I wish I could have done more. I figure the least I can do is remember her name. And how pretty she was." The baby had been a mere shell of itself when they finally found her—hair limp and cold, flesh wet and slimy, a silent scream locked upon its face—but they could still see… "She had a

patch of dark brown hair, a little red sea-shell mark on her head." Touching her temple at the exact spot where the mark had gleamed on Hannah, Ember rocked back and forth. "She was beautiful, Emery."

"…she was."

"And I don't want that to happen to anyone else, but I don't know what else I can do. So…I wanted to warn people." Growling under her breath, she ground her teeth. "I'm the Princess, I should be able to do more than this!"

"You do what you can." After a second more of thought, Emery added, "You willing to kill, Princess?"

Willing to… "What?"

"Kill. You think you can just refuse a Fae? Send them on their way?" Laughter, not the kind sort, bubbled from the woman's throat. "If it was so easy. Dealing with a Fae means death, in all its forms."

Ember trembled, her legs limp underneath her. An odd coldness crept into her blood. *Kill?* She had never considered such a thing. Stupid of her, really, because Emery was right. Fae were conniving and sneaky. If they'd set their sights on something, conventional means were not going to be sufficient. "Kill a Fae? Can you do that? Aren't they immortal?"

"Not quite." Emery perched herself on a chair, facing backward. "They like to think they are but anything can be killed. The how is the unknown. Iron doesn't have enough bite but if this Fae has ensnared not just your parents but another kingdom…"

Right. Not a good sign. "What are you going to do Emery?"

Shrugging, she said, "Likely stay right here. Let the folk with little ones know what you tol' me…all underhand like…and see what they do."

"You're not going to leave?"

"Leave? It's not easy, girl. Even without your father and mother, we're bound to Lord Byron. He owns our land. Owns our property. Owns our lives. If my husband was still around—if Lord Byron's war hadn't taken him—maybe I could see the point in trying but as it is? If I'm lucky, maybe this Fae'll send me the same place poor Hannah's spirit is. Least she wouldn't be alone then."

The Princess pondered saying sorry or asking if there was anything she could do, but those were hollow words. No one wanted to hear those. They fixed nothing.

So instead, Ember snuck out the window the same way she'd entered. "I promise after we deal with this, we'll find the Fae that took your daughter." She had been wary of it ever since it happened and if she

knew more information, she'd have pounced on it. Now, more than ever, she needed to pay it her full mind.

Emery shook her head, returned to her mundane duties with nary a change of face. "Don't feed me hope. You only choke on it."



"No, that is my final word on the matter, Helga."

"Well, it's not mine."

Fluttering around their chambers as a moth trapped within a lantern, Queen Helga was a bluster of energy. Her long, brown hair flew free, tangled and mangled about the base of her skull as her skirt drifted this way and that.

"Helga, you're being ridiculous." The King's voice, drowned in exhaustion, weighed heavy.

"Am I?" The woman all but thundered, air about her electrified as she spun. "Do you really think we can hold this alliance after her show in the main hall? May the God of Pity rain His tears on us! She would have been better off to spit in their faces!"

"It was unsightly, I will agree—"

"Unsightly?!" Helga approached her husband in wide, violent strides, tossing the pillows from the bed and climbing atop them, stopping when she straddled the shocked man, chest heaving with exhilaration.

"Unsightly is when you eat with the wrong fork. Unsightly is when you call someone by the wrong name. Ember accused our guest of being…well, of being…"

"Conniving? Sneaky? Underhanded?" The King offered.

"All of those!" She leaned close, her hair dropping into her face, giving her green eyes a sheen of desperation. "We talked about this, Wilhelm! The offerings they have—the foods, the fabrics, the magical abilities…"

"Hold your tongue right there, Helga."

Gently pushing her to the side, he stood, walking a ways about the room, coming to stop in front of the large window, gazing down at the distant forest, the shadow of the snowcapped mountains stretching its long fingers to brush the very base of his castle.

"Helga, have you stopped to consider that maybe instead of

appeasing these strangers, we ought to be listening to our daughter?"

It wasn't her usual fare to remain quiet; speaking her mind and exactly what she felt was her usual motive. Her voice emerged gradually, cold, with little urgency. "Surely, you jest. Please tell me you're attempting to bribe me with your humor, Wil."

"Hardly." Turning, his eyes focused and intense, he spoke with purpose and finality, a trait normally restricted for public announcements. "I mean it. Ember is a smart girl—no, she's almost a woman now—"

"So she considers herself. I've seen more intelligence from the farm boys sleeping with the pigs. She rejects every lesson I try to push into her thick skull—"

"She's wise in her own ways, Wife."

"You've always said that, no matter what foolishness she's done—"

"Because her having a different idea from you does not mean she's wrong."

There lay the crux of the issue. Wilhelm had married Helga out of admiration and friendship. She was wise within the courts, something he often lacked in and the methods she was willing to utilize for the advancement of her Kingdom startled him at times. In his youth, he'd viewed such ruthlessness to be useful and in many ways, it had been. Their kingdom, in terms of trade, riches, and goods flourished.

Yet, as time wore on, he saw the cons of such an approach. She would normally adhere to his judgment, but with the promise of beauty, magic, and fruits, she was proving quite obstinate on this factor.

And as time wore on, her obsession over the lost Kingdom of Zadkhanûn—over her right to repossess it—grew ever stronger.

But if there was anything King Wilhelm was stern on, it was his daughter.

"Wilhelm, surely, you aren't serious about considering her silly tales?"

"Are they so silly?" He offered. Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he cursed the lightheadedness and weariness setting in. Not unlike when the spring fever would come and occasionally leave him bedridden, the throbbing and sniffling replaced by an overall fatigue and sense of fog. "Did we not have the loss of a child to Fae mischief?"

"One child." Helga admitted, arms folded. "Sad but…honestly, Wilhelm, it was the child of a shepherdess. What would she have really amounted to, in the terms of the kingdom?"

Aghast, his voice betrayed his usual control. "Helga! May God

Gwenn hold your tongue for such things!"

"No." Shaking her head, she pushed herself to the reading desk and threw a stack of papers down, rustling in the wind from outside. "I won't hold it. For you, the Gods or anyone else. Truth is truth. Blacksmiths, chefs, soldiers…I might feel the impact of their loss amid the chaos of ruling, but the child of a woman that barely provides enough wool to serve more than her own household? I mourn the child, and the pain, but logically, it holds little impact."

Twisting his face into a mask of protruding lips, narrowed eyes and harsh vocals, the King remarked. "And that's all you ever consider, isn't it? The impact upon the Kingdom."

"Ruling is a hard state, Husband." she added the title with a sneer. "I take it upon myself to embrace it, rather than try and convince myself otherwise."

"No." He paced, stopping occasionally by the window. "No, you focus on what benefits you."

"The Kingdom and the King and Queen are one and the same." Argument fled from the impact of those words and the seething rage within them suffocated the room, as if no amount of air would ever dare to appear again. "Perhaps you've forgotten. Ember refuses to even learn it."

"Good." Hand on the bedpost as he passed by, he clicked his tongue under his breath, an odd habit he'd acquired over the years because alcohol didn't last long enough and had a horrendous odor. "I'm glad she hasn't. You'd do well to listen more to her and less to your own sins."

"She bewitches you more each day!" Throwing her arms in the air for a moment, the Queen slumped into the nearest plush chair a moment later, as if all energy fled from her, zapped away as the frost flees from spring. "So now, once again, I'm the bad guy for wanting more for our household, our Kingdom."

"I am not saying we ignore the proposal." Crossing the room, taking a steady breath with each step to calm his nerves and soothe the inner frustration at his wife's utter obstinacy, he took her hands, kneeling to look her in the eye. "I am simply saying, can we not look at Ember's concerns as well? You know as well as I for all her faults, she would not upheave a political event like this unless she felt it necessary." He narrowed his eyes, determination swollen in them. "Ember carries far more ruling finesse than you would grant her credit for—"

"What that girl considered 'necessary' is the stupid ideas those

dwarves push into her head. And why wouldn't it? The Fae demands nothing for their work, claiming it to be a pleasure, a gift, a pay back to the benefit of learning more about human government—"

"And that does not strike you as the slightest bit odd?"

Caught in a moment of admittance, the Queen gave a half shrug, a mere lifting of one shoulder and a tilt of the head. "Perhaps. But what do I know of what Fae value? Why would an immortal creature with command over magic desire gold, silver, or coin?"

"Indeed." The King admitted. "But why demand nothing? I have no love lost of dwarves, same as you, but at least their request of coin or raw materials make sense. You cannot say the Fae's request is reasonable, Wife."

"I can say it's the best deal we've had in a long time. Look at the benefits Gralcimm has fallen under! Did you speak with the King and Queen or even Prince Lance? Their kingdom has yet to fall victim to even a speck of locust since entering a partnership." Standing again, she pulled her husband up by the wrist, looked him in the eyes. "Imagine that. No worries on crops. No concerns regarding loss of the people to disease. You cannot tell me such a thing is not a mutually beneficial thing."

"Aye, it seems—"

"And if Ember is going to risk us losing that, then perhaps we ought to consider a different heir."

His hand slammed into the bed post. Not near her but enough to make sound and draw attention.

"Do not speak another word. I'll not hear it."

"Why not? Is it not our duty to ensure the best ruler will be in line for the throne? Ember has set this alliance into shambles. We'll be lucky if they don't set us up for war for her insolence."

"You're being ridiculous—"

"Hardly." She put her hands to her stomach. "My womb can still bear fruit, if you ever bothered to water it."

"You sought out elves for the child we have and you want to… replace her?" He backed away, as if poisoned by her words. "Have you no heart in you? To just throw away that gift?"

"Not throw away." She held up her hands. "You're acting like I'm talking about casting her into the wilderness. I said nothing of the sort. I simply said…I don't think she has the means to be a good ruler."

"And I said not another word." He walked off, toward the door, no doubt heading for his sitting room down the hall. It was the usual place

he retreated to when they had arguments and disagreements without resolution. “I’ll not engage with you any more with this.”

“But it needs to be addressed! Our alliance—“

“Then let the alliance fall apart!” Whirling around, lingering in the doorframe, Wilhelm’s face put the red of blood to shame. “I will *not* remove Ember’s birthright from her. You disliking her approach is *not* due cause!” As if to add fuel to his fire, he added. “If we were to have a *son*, I would not remove it from her! That is the end of it!”

Straightening, the King poured pure lightning into his words. “In fact, I would dare say she is old enough to inherit her title. With such blasphemy pouring from your mouth, I deem *you* unfit to rule and I would have her remedy that sooner rather than later.”

Helga’s mouth dropped. “Husband, you cannot be—”

Turning, his boots grinding into the stone, King Wilhelm ended their discussion as solidly as sunset ended day. “Perhaps, tomorrow eve. And we will make no agreements upon this alliance until she takes the crown. You have lost that right.”

The door slammed shut definitively behind him.

Storming from the room, Queen Helga fled in his footsteps, stopping as she heard the second slamming of the large wooden door that led to his personal study.

Whirling around so quickly it was a miracle her skirts did not trip her, she stormed down the hall, in the opposite direction. Eyes set on the quarters where she had personally escorted their guests, with ill-met promises to address her daughter’s foul behavior, Queen Helga muttered to herself and anything close enough to hear. “No. I will not let anything ruin this alliance. I am too close. I will not surrender it. Not to Ember. Not even to you.”



SHE HATED IT.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, her mother had delivered the mirror to Ember’s room. The Princess wasted no time in throwing a large cloth over it, since casting it out the window wasn’t exactly the best choice. Doubted she would have been able to lift it, to be frank.

Even under the fabric, those eyes still burned at her, laughed, scoffed.

Burning, like the heat of the sun in the midst of summer, leveling its eyes at her, rendering her naked and vulnerable even amid the relative safety of her own quarters. The longer it remained, the less at ease her nerves became.

Wetness against her hand drew her attention from the looming shadow currently occupying the far corner of her room. Looking down, she smiled, running her hand over the grey-white fur of a very well-known companion.

"Thanks, Chester." She lowered her head and cooed a slew of nonsensical sounds to the large hound who planted himself at her feet and refused to leave for any amount of time. The old hound, nearly as old as she was now, looked more ragged rug than fur, with the area around his snout full of whiteness, the once dark black fur now had lightened to be nearly grey.

He remained her best listener and she was grateful for the company. As the dog flopped his large head down on the girl's lap, she scratched behind his ears, emitting a low rumble of contentment from his throat.

"Spoiled baby." she remarked. When she'd been younger, he was one of the prize hunting dogs. He'd suffered an injury a few years ago and talk tossed about of simply putting him out of his misery. Ember had thrown herself into the argument, with a strong suggestion; he could no longer hunt, but he made a good watch dog and companion.

Mother had protested, insisted a more elegant dog would be much more suitable for a Princess but Ember had latched herself onto the canine—quite literally—and refused to move and Daddy had finally smiled and relented.

Thus, Chester became hers.

"What do you think, Chester?" She ran her nails through the dog's fur, settling behind his ears for a little longer than necessary, tilting her head as the familiar happy grumbles came from his throat. "Am I being too judgy or am I being smart?"

Eyeing the mirror out of the corner of her eye, she shuddered and her canine friend stood at the motion, nuzzling into her, attempting to comfort and warm her. While normally effective, she didn't divert her eyes, merely asked again, "Chester, what do you think?"

The dog flopped his head from one side to the other, but patrolled the room with his eyes. As it settled on the mirror, the dog drew his flesh back over his teeth, growling low and fierce.

"See? You don't like it either, huh?"

The voice came suddenly, breaking the air with a cold snap. "But dear

child, why?"

Fumbling out of bed onto her hands and knees, Ember whirled, hair sticking to her face as she moved. Heart already going far faster than what was comfortable, she darted for the nearest item she thought might be useful.

Pulling the poker from the fireplace far faster than what was usually advised and ignoring the light burn it transferred to her skin, she hoisted it up, leveling it at the intruder.

"Stay. Back." No compromise entered her voice waving under the iron tool's weight. Chester had moved to stand by her side and growled, baring his teeth at the newcomer. He did not know the scent and his mistress was on edge; her smell was coated in it.

The call to protect was innate.

Alyssum, the Fae from the great halls' feast, held up her hands.

Ember snorted, would have laughed at it if she were not so bubbled over with anger. The stereotypical symbol of nonaggression. As if a Fae's hands being empty meant anything when it came to non-aggression!

"Child, I come to speak, nothing more, nothing less."

"Well, too bad, I don't want to listen to you."

Circling, Alyssum drifted lightly about the ground, her feet barely even brushing the stone floor. No longer confined amid the colored trappings, the Princess found herself looking her over, as thoroughly as possible, without so much as a care to if such a thing were socially acceptable.

The relation between elf and Fae was indisputable. The fingers, white as salt but without the coarseness, stretched long and slender. Wrists almost seemed too narrow for such a length. Nails were a teal shade, pointed but rounded. The hair seemed to grow but maybe it was just the fact it moved and wavered even without the windows open.

"Child, why do you reject us? Reject me? I come bearing good news, gifts, great purpose—"

"Why?" Tightening her grip and dangerously close to shouting for her guards, Ember drew her face into a scowl. "What good does it do for you to help us?"

"Are you so questioning of all?" Light reproach colored the words.

"That's for me to know." Tossing her hair out of her eyes again, Ember pressed the poker forward, stopping just short of the Fae's exposed neck. While the creature did not flee, visible sweat dotted her hair line and the thick swallowing was apparent.

"Will you not even look at what my gift can offer you?"

Seeming to vanish in a flash of color, the Fae reappeared by the mirror, casting the cloth away. “Truly, child, merely give it a try!”

Coldness coated the room, as deeply and intensely as if she had been swept away by winter’s first frost. Nothing changed, per say, except for the deepest of feelings in her gut.

The surface of the mirror swirled.

Clouded, grey and soft, much like when the sky would darken and smooth with rain. Heavy yet with a promise of deeper swells.

Chester growled and barked, weaving to stand in front of the girl.

“Come.” The voice was hauntingly sweet, as if birds were echoing amid an otherwise silent wood. Soft and welcoming yet with an undertone of ominous gifts.

Gritting her teeth, Ember stepped back again, but her step was weak, quivering. No word for it but the mirror was calling to her. Not like in the main hall. There, she had all but felt as if it were snarling at her.

Not here. She could see no scowls on the frame anymore but that didn’t mean they weren’t there. Yet, why could she no longer see them?

Squeezing her eyes shut, she listened. Surely the shouting and yelling voices were still there? She knew she’d not imagined them. Shadows of the mind she could handle but these had been more than shadows.

Had they? Was it merely her own fears and stubbornness contorting them? Was it a gift she had shunned out of her own selfishness? Was she alerting her kingdom over nothing?

“See, child?” Warmth trickled in her ear, honey to her nerves. Without much input on her own, she found her feet gliding about the stone, so unlike her usual steps, leading her to stop right before the glass, still swirling and moving, a hypnotic dance.

Stretching out her fingers, they brushed coolness, but the kind of coolness of a bubbling spring amid the torment of summer. The type that soothed the skin and refreshed the spirit.

Chester turned to his mistress, barked, and even nipped at her hand.

“Surely, child, do you see now? All your cares and fears were for naught.”

Her worries, stilled, fought and then went silent.



Being accepted shouldn't have been unsettling but it was. Or to be more specific, not being gawked and scowled at. Actions filled with false beliefs, hidden anger, and snobbish self-importance.

Tyr frowned, slipping around another corner, almost careening into a soldier stomping past. Righting himself, standing as tall as he could, he held his breath, closed his eyes and tried to look as statuesque as possible. Not to blend in (he wasn't stupid; he stuck out like blood on snow) but to appear as nonthreatening as possible. Unmoving targets were less of a challenge.

Yet, with barely more than a gruff 'oof' the soldiers shoved him aside and kept walking. Casting a cautious gaze at them, Tyr huffed and kept going, hugging the wall.

Fingers pressed deep into the old stone, he welcomed the presence of rock tingling beneath his skin. Carved centuries ago, the walls held firm

as the day they were created, but each new generation meant the stone learned and taught. Just as the side of a tower most exposed to the sun would fade faster than the side away from it, the stone within might as well have been calling to him for how to reach Ember's chambers.

He'd never been there and in fact, he likely would be in for quite the lecture, if not worse, upon his return if anyone found out he'd ventured up into the corridors above but he deemed it a necessary evil.

He didn't argue when the stone sang.

It had been nearly deafening when he awoke this morning. Singing stone directed its music strictly to the people it desired to hear it and evidently, that meant him. He wasn't alien to it; if a dwarf reached the years where the body prepared for its Forging without hearing the stone sing at least once, it was a travesty at the minimum.

All it did was reinforce his desire to go and see Ember.

The human Princess never failed to let them know, in one way or another, what direction political engagements took and given the uncertainty surrounding the guests (who seemed to be making themselves more comfortable by the moment) Tyr had expected her to come shouting into the forges late at night.

Yet, here they were, well past the breaking of the fast and approaching the midday meal without so much as a peep from her. Not about to sit back and find out something horrendous had occurred without his knowledge, Tyr left the relative safety of the forges, venturing into the upper world.

Frighteningly compact and full of strangers that would as soon kill a dwarf as to look at them, Tyr had come cloaked in *feslin* armor, draped over him as curtains wrapped sunlight in a window.

Nevertheless, as he walked, his smaller stature, square build and shimmery skin made him impossible to miss, but he found he did not receive so much as a glance. No chattering, no scoffs, no insults delivered in a foreign tongue.

Nothing.

Nerves ablaze—as violently hot as any forge—Tyr continued his trek. Each step brought more individuals of the court and while he didn't know them personally, he could guess their roles. Maids, ladies in waiting, knights, butlers, and even a handful of cooks.

Something was off, something he couldn't quite put his mind to. Interaction with the taller folk was something the elders really handled, save for Ember's friendship, but the overall distantness of everyone cut the air as a knife.

Often, it was not the presence of a threat that alarmed but the absence of one.

Energy bubbled under his veins and each step sent his blood into a frenzy. If he heard one more light sigh or another airy giggle so out of place the Great Thrend's beard would curl—

There! Jacob was impossible to miss and he'd never seen him face to face but Tyr knew him from Ember's stories—tall, thick boned, hair swept upward and to the side and just enough hair on his face to not be mistaken for a boy (well, by mannish standards) but most notable was the presence of the royal seal upon his chest, holding his short cape in place.

"Jacob!"

Aye, he'd been right. The man turned, hand half to his sword hilt but paused and diverted his eyes downward. "A dwarf? In the upper halls?"

"Yes," Tyr jeered, his small beard puffed out and he folded his arms, "You know your species, very good. Upper crust education wasn't wasted on you."

As dark clouds covered the man's face, Tyr cursed his quick tongue. "Look, I'm looking for Ember."

"What business has a dwarf with the Princess?"

Ah, there was the arrogance and uppity attitude he was used to, but even this was mild. Barely what he'd expected from the looks and words often exchanged in the rare times the accountants for the king would venture into their small areas. "Because I'm her friend and she hasn't come to give a report on the visitors."

Such an odd thing happened—across Jacob's face, his eyes widened and the pupils dilated. It was a fraction of a second, a whisper of time. The kidnapping of attention held for a moment before something else wretched back one's focus.

"The Princess has been busy in her chambers for most of the morning. She's not been letting anyone enter until she's finished. I will pass along your concerns."

"Don't bother." Tyr maneuvered around the man, slipping behind. "I'll ask her myself."

"The Princess asked not to be disturbed!"

A gloved hand curved around Tyr's shoulder with a tight snap. Reacting to the burst of strength, the loose almost wispy waves of the *feslin* armor tightened and hardened into a crisp shell of white.

Jacob pulled back as much from surprise as pain.

Tyr turned, grasped the soldier by the arm, and pushed him against

the wall, harsh enough and high enough to make the man's toes leave the stone floor.

Dwarves were a great many things and physically superior in strength to men was one of them. A right odd sight they must have been—a fully armored knight held immobile by one arm from a creature that came to a stop at the man's waist.

Bright eyes of blue burned into Jacob's face as Tyr lowered his voice. It turned out such a feat was unnecessary as none of the bustling crowds about them made so much as a blink to the altercation. One by one, they kept walking, seemingly in a daze.

Unnerving.

"Listen. And listen to listen, not just to speak your peace." Tyr's voice rumbled, weight heavy in his throat. "Look around you. Your own fellow soldiers aren't rushing over here to ambush me. The ladies aren't screaming. No one is shouting about a filthy dwarf being up here. Ember—energetic Ember who probably has pollen and wind gusts instead of blood—is holed up in her room."

The knight's eyes shifted, drifting to the left then right. Like when one would shake their head to clear confusion and the fog of sleep.

Or the bafflement from some other source.

Leaning in as close as he could, given their height difference, Tyr drove home his point. "You don't find that a wee bit odd?"

There! There it was!

Light shimmers, sparkling as fallen and lost stars, danced about the man's eyes, struggling to stay within and work their enchantment. Something was forcing them out…

Wait! "Of course, Tyr you *deskun*!"

With a sharp thud, Tyr's grip dropped slack, leaving Jacob to tumble to the ground. Given the height difference between them, it wasn't a long fall. The knight scrambled to regain balance fairly quickly but by that time, Tyr had already removed the thin leather strap around his upper arm and tied it around the man's wrist.

Stepping back, he waited.

Almost instantly, Jacob went back to his knees, hissing between his teeth. It was an eerie noise. Pain certainly caused one sound and pleasure another, but this was a different tone. Choking, gasping, and the cacophony of drowning without water.

Sweat glistening on his forehead, the knight moved to sit up, knees quivering and breath coming in ragged motions. The tight leather band wrapped about his wrist hummed.

An odd, nearly silvery like mist had taken it, enough it gleamed white.

"Fae." The man trembled, eyes darting about, as if seeing for the first time. In a way, he was. The spell was fractured and the oddities Tyr commented about were clear to him.

"'Course. Surprised it took them this long." Tyr yanked the man to his feet, ignoring the hiss as his grip left light bruises on the skin. Men were so fragile. Like trying not to shatter a glass vase. "But looks like the Fae's been busy."

"How could…my spirit is far better than this!" Frustration bled off the older man, his teeth gritted tight and fists balled at his side. "I am not easily swayed."

"Don't need to be." Tyr took his hand a moment, long enough to anchor him. "Not if they had inside help. Now, where's Ember?"

With those slur of syllables, duty retook the soldier's mind. Regardless of his thoughts on dwarves, Tyr spied the priority in his eyes. "The Princess…"

Taking off faster than any mortal should have been capable of moving, Jacob vanished beyond the corridor's turn and Tyr, cursing under his breath, gave chase. There was, after all, only one place he would rush off to.



PRISONS WERE MADE of more than just bars.

Mother used to scoff at all her silly games, but Daddy had laughed, smiled, and encouraged her. Mother won out, as she usually did, and her thoughts and dreams became tapped away in her mind. They still lived, tiny wisps trying to escape any chance presented to them, be it through art, laughing gossip, or serious discussion with the elders.

Never taken seriously, mere whispers in the dark of the day.

She had become the wisps of thought. Her body moved, she heard and smelled and saw, but it was through a curtain of mist. Her mind would throb as she drifted about, as she sent Chester from her sight, shut the doors tight and set about going through dozens upon dozens of old parchment.

For her age, she remained as involved as possible and through no will

of her own, her fingers sorted through old notes and agreements. There seemed no connection between them just as she felt no desire yet sought them out all the same.

Page after page of interactions. Letters to Kings and Queens. Trade agreements from Dukes and Duchesses. Messages regarding incidents, tragedies, and disasters. Discussion of population, birth rates, death rates, diseases.

Information.

Not just any kind of information, but detailed information on exports, imports, the types of labor, the health, and landscape. Details that meant next to nothing to the rulers; they knew the exchange of these facts for mundane deliveries of trade and gifts but to someone else, an outsider, they contained endless amounts of intelligence.

What business a Fae had with gathering intelligence on human cities, Ember truly couldn't say but it seemed an irrelevant matter. Point remained they were seeking it and using the people to carry it out!

Using *her* to carry it out!

Limbs heavy, she gritted her teeth, so hard they ought to have cracked and splintered, but to anyone on the outside, they would have seen a sickly sweet and passive look about her face. A simplistic image of one pursuing a hobby to garner joy and nothing more. Such was the cruelty and cleverness of the Fae.

Invading a kingdom and seeking out the answers on their own, even with disguises rendering them human-like, would draw attention, even from the most distracted of soldiers and staff. Yet, with this method, the people themselves did the work and the Fae profited.

Ember shuddered, the slick feeling of another presence writhing through her mind. Intangible yet existent, much like the chill of winter was always preceded by the rushing winds from the northern mountains. As the wind would come, the trees would rustle, the animals would flee for the warmth of their owners' hearths, and the flowers would crumble under the thin frost of evening.

Unseen the wind remained but its presence was undeniable.

Such was the Fae in Ember's thoughts. Twisting, burrowing, darting here and there, as easily as Ember would explore the palace walls. Perhaps it became all the worse with the voice.

Always, always it was there—a bittersweet, taunting tone even now pretending to be a friend, a companion. Sugar-coated words, promises of a better future, and of freedom to be given back once safety was secured.

I mean you nothing but good things, sweet Princess. You shall see, you shall

see. Oh, do trust me…

Ember slammed the collection of papers in front of her shut, slipping them back into their leather casing, and pushed herself back, her feet catching with each step until she sank upon her bed. Her body rejected each gesture, as if she were pulling away from ropes made of brass and iron. The parchments, still set upon her table, sang out, an eerie call to her ears that had her knees snapping to tightness.

Wrapping her arms about herself, as much as she could manage, Ember fought.

The conniving, little wisps of her mind had become full-fledged fog, a suffocating blanket pulling her consciousness this way and that. Her vision swirled. Sorry to disappoint the Fae but she wasn't about to succumb, not now that she knew what they were after.

How much of her mind could they access? Combating the command over her body was one thing, but what barriers could she create in her own thoughts?

Had to be some. Otherwise, why not just pull the information she needed right now?

Because she couldn't. No other explanation for it.

Deep breath in, Ember continued her inward battle, curled into a ball on her bed. When had she lost herself? It had to have been the mirror, that damned mirror. Yet, she'd not fallen last night.

Why? What was so different?

The soft sheets were of little comfort but she turned into them. Clutching tiny tuffs of green silk between her fists, breathing went hard and heavy. Each motion, each movement was harsh, full of fire and lead. Anytime she moved towards the left, she grew heavy.

Oh, the Fae didn't like that. Good.

Think! She racked her memories, sifting through the past few hours with the ferocity of a child seeking a parent in a storm. Nothing, not even magic, was without its rules. With little to no struggle last night, when the dreaded mirror first appeared and being taken by it almost entirely not even a few hours ago, despite the ravings of her mind, something was not the same.

Shadows clouded the thoughts. Peering through it was harder and harder, sight distorted and blurry. Trying to see through a door coated in broken beams and dust. Yet, all the same, something shimmered in her memories, bright green.

What was green and…?

Her necklace.

You're just thinking about that because it's right next to the bed. Indeed, it is a lovely piece, child. Nothing about that with significance…

Shut up! She cursed the Fae voice, pushing it back with the command of her station as well as her tenacity. *I'll decide what's relevant.*

Why do you fight so, little Princess? All I mean to do is bring your kingdom into prosperity and wealth, as I have your neighbors. There's no need to be so persistent and—

If it's not important, why don't you want me thinking about it? If you're trying to convince me it's as irrelevant as you say, you're doing a piss-poor job of it. And it's—of course!

Rolling onto her stomach, Ember nearly passed out, an alien tiredness collapsing her muscles. Without warning, without reason, her limbs fell heavy and limp, her eyes drooped, and reason clouded with dreams.

Dwarves.

Dwarves fixed her necklace. Dwarven touch repelled magic. It was in all their stories, all their tales. Why else would Fae and dwarves hate each other? Why else couldn't elven and dwarven works be combined?

Fumbling, her wrist clammed on the stand, sending a throbbing through her bones, making her vision red a moment, and a rather unladylike word cross her lips. "Gods' wounds!"

Perhaps the Fae was hoping a clumsy injury might dissuade her but the surge of energy that accompanied the pain gave her just enough focus to grab the nearby jeweled necklace and clutch it tightly between her fingers. Rubbing the repaired link between her pointer and thumb, she gave into the exhaustion and slumped onto the bed, face down. Water replaced her muscles and she inhaled with a low croak.

Fire rocked her body.

Fire, lightning, water, and oil. All together and yet not touching at all. Her blood boiled and froze and her skin crawled and shriveled and shrank. Breath erupted from her chest with a low gape and without her fingers entwined with the chain, the savior necklace might have fallen away, slipping from her grip.

But Ember's fingers held firm.

Damn you, girl. Why can't you just cooperate? Your mother was so welcoming. I want to save your kingdom!

For yourself…

For everyone! This is a simple step in the process. Wouldn't it be worth it in the end? Wouldn't it be worth this brief imprisonment if your kingdom prospers?

Tightening her grip on the necklace, Ember's body convulsed,

tumbling to the ground with a dull thud. It resonated slightly within her mind but more importantly, the Fae cried out, too.

And who's going to make you give up control?

When she received no reply, Ember tightened her grip, leaving chain imprints in her flesh. Screaming began in her mind.

Let it go! Let it go! Let the damn thing go, Girl!

"…no."

The shaky response, despite the utter dryness, stretched over her mouth, a foul, ill-fitting glove. Yet, it broke through and a moment following the weight lifted from her arms. Breathing came easier a heartbeat later and the misty fog surrounding her eyes gradually thawed, her vision clearing on the hard stones of her floor.

Inhale. Breathe. Trembling, Ember pushed her hand against the floor, letting out a low whimper when it responded to her command without any delay. So sure was she to feel resistance her knuckles scraped the cobblestones. Pulling them to her mouth on instinct, she recoiled, losing her balance and tumbling all the way to the ground, prone once more.

Dazed but more alert than she had felt in hours, Ember pulled herself upright. Inhaling again, she forced in breath after breath, relishing in the lack of weight to it. Closing her eyes, she sought out the Fae, cursing her name.

Her mind remained empty, save for her own thoughts. Slumping, energy zapped from her limbs, she gave a shuddery laugh, the kind of laugh of empty airiness when one is beyond the ability to stop. Where relief fills the veins and conscious thought flees to the wind.

After gathering herself, Ember pushed strength into her muscles and stood, leaning on the night table to gain her balance. Fingers still entwined with the necklace, her eyes found their target in the mirror, still standing at the center point of the room, its surface so crystal clear it was uncanny.

The faces in the frame were back, darkness oozing from their surface. Scowling at her, anger flooded through the room, coating her skin with dark ice.

Taking more strength than she was comfortable discussing, Ember grasped the frame and shoved. She pulled and pressed her full weight against it. Propping her foot on the wall, prying with her shoulder, the shifting of balance finally teetered the tender clawed feet and it toppled forward.

Sharp shards cut her legs as the glass erupted upon the stone. Stinging drips of red ran from her flesh, but her thought was on the glass

now in her skin. Who knew how the magic of a mirror worked?

Plopping down on the ground, in a rather unladylike fashion, Ember pried her nails into the small cuts, enlarging several of them, flicking away the shards of glass. One, two, five, seven, ten in all she pulled away with smudges of blood.

Closing her eyes, she drifted again, waiting, seeking any other influence within her mind. Eternity painted itself on the inside of her eyelids but no echo of another responded to her reach.

Her mind and body were hers alone.

Standing back up, she wiped her bloodied fingers on her dress, marring the green fabric with red. The mirror, glass decorating the floor, while still, seemed to breathe, the wood quivering, as if waiting for an influence to flood it with life again.

Air blew at her back with the thrusting open of the door, pulling Ember to whirl on her heels to face whatever intruder came.

"Ember!"

"Princess!"

Exhaling, the young woman allowed herself to collapse into a hug when Tyr offered it, falling to her knees briefly.

Jacob's eyes immediately darted over her, lingering on her bloody fingers, but he said nothing. Unlike most, if she didn't appear to be in pain, he would not fuss unless she gave him cause to.

"Ember, are you—?"

"No." She interrupted Tyr, taking the moment to fasten the necklace into its proper place, resting against her throat. "No and my kingdom isn't either. Are—?"

"Like the undead." Jerking his head toward Jacob, the dwarf said. "Knocked him out of the spell. Looks like you did the same thing. How did Fae enchant the whole palace?"

"I don't know." Heart quivering in her chest, her voice caught. "The…whole palace?"

"Near as I can figure. Not even Charming here," he again diverted his attention to Jacob, "could get any help from his pals when I showed up and started tossin' him around." He paused, adding. "Didn't mean to leave any bruises on you, just so you know."

"Understood, the situation permits it." Focusing on Ember, Jacob offered her a hand. "Princess, the situation is precarious, you cannot remain here."

"What about my parents?" The Fae had mentioned her mother. Several times. And with pleasure. "Daddy? Mother?"

"I've not yet encountered the King or Queen. If they are anything like the rest of the palace, we must assume—Princess!"

Ember pushed past him, throwing her door open and tearing down the hall. Her breath was tight. Her parents. They had to be under the same kind of spell she had been. The same aura of control. But she had the means to save them. A way to pull them back to reality.

Daddy would believe her. He always did. Found her stubbornness both endearing and frustrating, but he would fight. If he knew what the Fae was doing, he would protest, he would rebel and cast them and their allied 'friends' from the kingdom with nary a thought. He would take back their kingdom. The only way this could have happened was if the spell took his will like the mirror claimed hers.

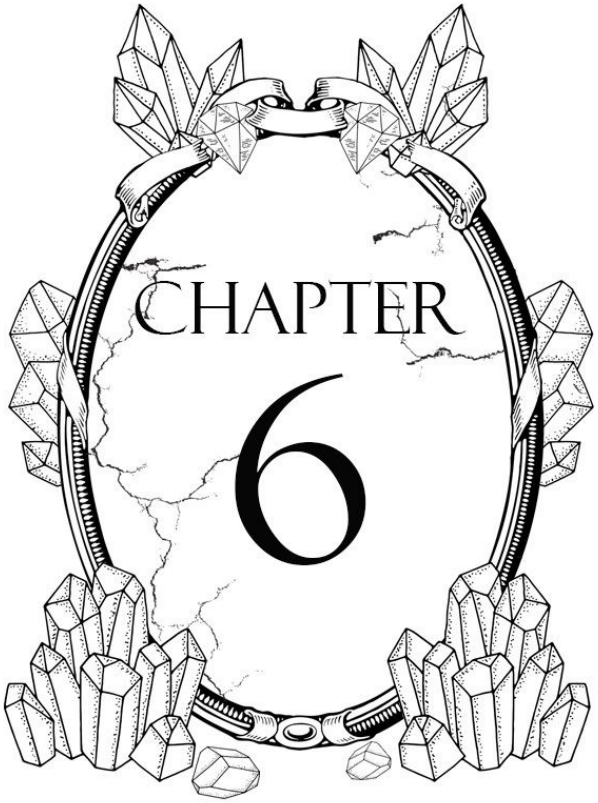
Mother…

Sickness rang through her, from hair tip to toes. As much as Mother loved magic, material things, beauty, was it so out of the range of possibility she would have welcomed the Fae?

Had the Fae been telling her the truth? Had her own Mother given control to an invader?

She wanted to shout and scream *no, of course not*! She wanted to protest the notion—as pompous as her mother could get, there were lines she would not cross.

But Ember had never been good at lying, not even to herself.



Tyr and Jacob exchanged jabs as they ran.

"For a personal guard, you're dragon shit."

"Oh, quite creative. I suppose you found ogre manure or troll bile too minor a statement?"

Without missing a moment of hesitation, Tyr said, voice sharp and cutting. "Yes. Ogre shit and troll spit are great fertilizers. Dragon shit kills everything. 'Bout sums you right up."

"I digress, Dwarf—"

"Tyr." Turning the corner down another corridor, the tension within the air layered deeper and the command in Ember's tone was unmissable. "His name is Tyr. I don't know how he stumbled upon you, but dwarves don't usually come up into the court. He did, knowing how they'd look at him for it. And, if what you tell me is true, you've got your mind back because of him. Least you can do is use his name."

A low noise, almost a combination of a growl and a rumble, emitted deep in the throat answered the request but no recognition emerged. It was a silent rebellion.

Tyr stated, turning a corner and increasing his speed to keep up with the two humans' longer strides. "She tells no lies."

"I am Princess Ember's personal guard and I carry the title with pride. Do you think I would have stood by and let her fall under enchantment if I were not enchanted myself?"

"Dunno. Can't say I really know you well. Far as I know, you could be lusting after her and were in on this the whole time."

"Mind your tongue! To suggest I—"

"Is perfectly logical since I'm never *allowed* up here." Snorting and grumbling a dwarven insult under his breath, Tyr heightened his tone, barely an octave. "My *kind* isn't welcomed, remember? But you sure don't mind abusing all the stuff we make."

Nothing. Silence, with only the solitary slam-slam-slam of boots on stone echoing with dark intensity.

Ember pulled ahead.

"The Princess deserves the chance to speak with the Queen and King." Jacob grasped for the dwarf's shoulder as they rushed forward. "I mean to support her to do so—"

"How thick is your head?!" Jerking back, Tyr turned, his boots grinding into the stone. "Are you seriously *still* siding with the King and Queen? Especially the Queen? Why in the name of stone did I free you again?"

"You strive to give me an excuse to strike you down, Dwarf. My duty is to the royal family. The Queen and King may have their flaws but they are victims in this, as much as I am. As much as the Princess is."

"Use her *slagging* name!" Anger poured from his mouth. "It's Ember. Use it!" Before another word could be said, he continued his tirade. "How is it that someone as dense as you survived so long? I dunno about the King but the Queen…pfft! She'd sell out this kingdom for a new throne."

"You speak treason—"

"Can't speak treason. I'm not one of her subjects. But I'll say what I think. Every time Ember comes to see us, I hear about some backhanded compliment she received or some conversation where she always ended up feeling worse at the end of it—"

"A mere reflection of the Queen's rather…intense nature—"

"Intense." Diverting his eyes away from Jacob, Tyr set his thoughts

back on Ember, following the faint color of her skirts in the distance. Maybe it was better not to argue with someone as loyalty blind as this knight but, "Intense is a funny way to describe cruelty."

"Cruelty. Far from it. Our Queen has her own methods for maintaining control. The young Princess may not always understand it —"

"Look." Tyr upped his speed, focusing more on the sound of Ember's steps, growing gradually closer than Jacob's voice. "If you wanna die for a kingdom run by a Queen who doesn't give a rat's ass about her own daughter, let alone you, be my guest. I intend to be there for Ember."

He paused, darted to the left and laid his hand on the wide, smooth stone, but did not delay his trek forward, letting his fingertips dance over the roughly carved rock.

Tapping into stone sense was hard without it first calling out. Stone was old and fickle. He considered, briefly, the possibility, because it had led him toward Ember when he first came up here, it might have withdrawn any further support. Stone had more reason than even the most prejudiced of dwarves to despise humans.

Yet, it *had* answered him. No, it had called to him about Ember! Continuously, driving him to venture upward into this chaos mess. Surely, it would not abandon him now.

Be persistent, Older Brother Vasir would always say. *Stone is stubborn but She responds well to determination.*

Be open. Older Sister Bila would say. *The Stone is responsive to the heart most of all*.

Honesty. Mother, his *Nanki,* always preached. *Stone is our Mother—the Mother of All—She can tell when you lie.*

Yet, Tyr found himself more drawn to his Brother-of-his-Father's words.

Just be.

What that meant, he'd never been entirely sure, but it seemed a combination of everything—memory, heart, determination, and spirit. Not as simple as verbal communication and yet much less complicated at the same time.

Thinking too much about it resulted in failure, so Tyr gave his heart over to the stone. Pondering Ember's fate and the potential danger the Queen might be for her. Remembering the scent of her tears when she ran into the depths of their forge, asking why her mother hated her and why she couldn't do anything right and he'd let her lean on his shoulder. He'd curse the Queen, despite her reputation, and remind Ember that

‘she tells nothin’ but lies,’ and relish when a little light returned to her eyes. She’d smile and giggle as she talked about Shepard Fritz’ new stubborn foal and how funny the little thing walked. Talking about how when she became Queen there would be no more ‘lesser-than’ conditions. Asking for Tyr to show her ‘one more time’ as he brought the heat in the forge so hot it turned white as snow and how she all but sung about wanting to learn the magic they did with metal.

Tingling flooded his fingertips, making the nerves within his bones dance.

The wall caved inward, opening a pathway meant for the small and compact. Amid Jacob’s gasp and barely bitten down cursing of whatever Gods they followed, Tyr smiled. One could hardly blame him.

This wasn’t a tunnel already there. Secret passages might abound in old castles, but this wasn’t one. No passages existed in these halls; the stone was too thin and too closely bound to the nearby towers and rooms.

Yet, here one was.

This was one the Stone made for him, pushing Her minerals and Her fragments aside, creating empty space where there had been none. Stones turned outward, granite curved, and a path made new and firm. The crumbling and shouting from the nearby compartments as furniture tumbled to the ground as wood and metal caved beneath the push of stone.

“What magic do you—?”

Tyr abandoned Jacob to his stammering and slipped away into the tunnel, pulling his hair loose amid the dark. The sensation of the dark—smell, hearing, but most of all touch, gathered at the tips of his hair and trembled as they raged up the tresses, bringing the vital information of what lay ahead and what lay behind with nary a traitorous speck of light.

Tyr ran and the small opening within the palace wall crunched shut behind him, leaving no mark of there ever having been a doorway at all.



THE DOOR TAUNTED HER.

Odd thing to consider perhaps but as anyone who ever entered the Queen’s chambers—invited or otherwise—could attest to, her very spirit

seemed to seep into every square inch of the room.

The large door, a deep cherry wood, carved with intricate animals and angelic figures, stared. Looking down their wooden noses and mentally berating every piece, from toe to top. If someone'd the nerve to push the door inward, the wood would scream, an inanimate warning to flee from what dwelt beyond its barriers. The door's carven guardians, for all their intensity, seemed to cry a final plea as she passed underneath and into the wide open chamber. When the door slammed shut with a definite clank, the final lock on chains was complete.

Fire crackled without warmth. Smoke and shadow still drifted out from the hearth, but the tall figure standing before it absorbed anything sustaining about it. Face thin and stoic, eyes burning with all the strength the fire lacked, Queen Helga was still.

"Come. Sit, Daughter." With a voice that bit as cleanly as a wolf, there was no denying the command. But just as a bird call was the precursor to slaughter, so too was such false sweetness from the Queen.

Ember planted her feet, firm as the mountain roots, and did not move.

Silence reigned.

Queen Helga's orders couldn't be ignored but Ember would not move. She'd come here with hope in her heart, a desire her mother was enchanted as she'd been. Dreams she clung to as desperately as broken grains in the clenched palms of a starving man.

Her mother was as sane and grounded as she had always been, gazing into the fire with a nonchalant expression. Little escaped Ember's attention when she bothered to direct it and learning her mother's signs had been a matter of survival. She knew the coldness of anger and the safety an alcohol induced slumber would provide, rare as they were. Passing through the halls had sent her by the others: servants, nobles, and all that fell in-between, faces painted in the dulled perception Fae magic created. A vague disposition where little of the mind could peak through. A prison made of her own mind and body.

Trembling at the memory of her own imprisonment, she cast her eyes over her mother, seeking the solemn and soft features of a person under control and not operating under their own will.

Her search came up wanting.

Queen Helga commanded.

"Sit." Came the word again. "Surely, you can obey that, Ember."

"I prefer to stand." Words were swift, before nerve was lost. "Mother, have you seen the people?"

The Queen didn't turn to look at her, but such a thing was hardly unusual. She rarely bothered to lock eyes with her daughter when they spoke and unspoken rules on eye contact ruled their interactions over the years and were burned in Ember's heart. Look at those whom were equal in status and no one else.

Not even the King held such rule.

Ember kept her eyes down or diverted to the left each time the Queen's skirts fluttered as she moved. Better to obey and respond than endure whatever poisonous words might come her way. Disguised as wine though they were, they burned the soul with raw poison all the same.

But she had to pursue, had to know, had to get the Queen to realize what a predicament their kingdom was in. What a predicament their people were in.

"Mother." She tried again when her inquiry brought no response. "You *have* seen them, then? The people—"

"Of course I have. A necessary evil for the time. Thanks to you, our lovely Princess of decorum." Fire flanked the sides of her throat with each flash of breath. "Do you have any idea of the offers I've had to make to undo your little fiasco?" Short, curt, and stabbing, the words ached. "Of all things, I supposed even *my* daughter could manage one night, a few hours." A sigh, weighed with disappointment, tumbled out as if the very thought were strenuous. "I think too highly of you. Again."

Ember closed her eyes. *Focus*. She told herself. *Remember why you did that! Remember*! "I did what I needed to do for my people."

"Look at you, spouting large declarations you have no means to back up. Maybe not ever with that kind of attitude!" Finally whirling to look at her daughter, the Queen's face was a storm cloud, lightning sparking in her green eyes. "It was not just an alliance, worthless girl! It's a Fae alliance. Do you know what opportunities Fae are capable of? Riches, youth, power, magic! Magic, Ember! Can your small mind comprehend that at least?"

Head still dipped, Ember retorted, "Magic is risky—"

"Risk is part of being a ruler! It encompasses our entire role." Helga crossed the room, stopping just before Ember, grasping her by the chin. Long nails caressed the girl's cheek and lingered there. "Naturally, you wouldn't know that. Your mind can never focus on your tutoring classes. I never should have given in to using Henry. Only strict punishment makes its way into your brain."

The nails cut, ever so slightly, into the skin.

Ember swallowed, wet her throat. “I understand the risk, Mother, but what’s the price of magic? It doesn’t just come from nowhere!”

“Of course it doesn’t!” Helga tightened her grip. “Do I look like a fool? Magic is a trade good. What do you think I spent all of last night doing?”

“I—”

“Undoing *your* mess. Do you know what access to magic means? What it could do for me?” Helga pulled at her head, showing a lightly colored hair into view. “Look. Grey. But it’s already fading. Old age doesn’t have to be a problem if *someone* doesn’t ruin it.”

The Queen swept her hand toward the walls where the numerous tapestries rested, emblems of gold, silver, and greens. Her fingers drifted to rest on one in particular. While woven with abstractness in their purpose, one could still make out a grand palace, higher than all other objects in the cloth. Clothed in golden and silver shades, with dots of every hue running up and down the sides, it caught the shimmer of the sunlight hovering overhead on the left and the pale moonlight woven in the right. All heaven’s sight cast upon the kingdom as pools of the brightest blue flowered beneath it, dripping down into pastures rich with every fruit imaginable.

It was a familiar story.

Her favorite story.

The one piece Mother and Daughter could bond over.

“The tale of Zadkhanûn. Surely, you haven’t forgotten it?”

“No.” Not even a day ago, she had gushed over this story herself. The experience was eons away, confronted with the look on her mother’s face drove it into the tattered halls of her memory. With the woman’s voice trembling raw with anticipation, Ember found the words about her favorite tale tainted. For her mother, it rang deeper than even Ember had pictured. Desperation thrived in those green eyes.

“This is what we are meant for.” Thrusting one of her fingers at the tapestry, Helga rubbed at the fabric, caressing it between her fingers as she spoke. “Gold and silver walls, flowing waters that never cease. Fruits of every desire. Hoisted above, a testament to the Gods on Earth!” She clutched at her chest, a livid desire burning in her eyes, peering out at her daughter with a wildness neither mortal nor immortal, but utter yearning made flesh. “That is what we are, Daughter. Gods. Chosen representatives of the Lords Above. Zadkhanûn was our ultimate prize, our greatest treasure.”

Ember’s throat felt taut. Her mother’s pacing was not unusual, but

this level of chaotic energy was. An invisible mist caked her and gave each movement a sheen of anxiety.

Zadkhanûn seemed less a mystical tale and more a temptation. Violation. When Ember told the stories, she would laugh and smile about the glorious things the kingdom had been able to do, to provide, and how its short reign had been glorious for all involved.

When her mother spoke of it, it was toxic.

"It was ours, once. Your ancestors…my ancestors. We called Zadkhanûn home until the Dwarves claimed it. Pulled it down, brick by brick."

No. Mother Stone took it back. The dwarves had built it, poured their sweat and blood into it. No one else could have achieved it. They would never have destroyed it. Her mother was speaking of hatred in lies. Ember shook her head, voice soft. "I don't believe that."

"You believing it or not doesn't make it any less true!" Helga's eyes darted back and forth, over and over, from the tapestry to her daughter, to the floor, to the fire, everywhere in the room before settling back on the mirror where they stood. "You would defend those ground-lappers over anything, they've had you bought so!"

Anger ran in through Ember's body, rippling each muscle and sending white hot fire in her nerves. With everything the Dwarves did and made, her mother had to know what she was saying was nothing but falsehoods. Even with as much hate as the woman had for Dwarves, blaming the fall of an ancient kingdom on them was pure folly.

The way the Queen's wrist twitched and her pace closed in and out of the exit pathways silenced Ember's protests. Mother was unpredictable anyway. As much as Ember longed to shout and scream that her mother didn't know anything about Dwarves and how dare she use such a crude term for such artisans, self-preservation kept her still.

"And here we are, faced with one of the few chances to gain back what was taken from us and you insist on being a barrier. I ought to call you a traitor for risking the Fae's help!" Eyes wide, skin tight about the knuckles, Ember was almost convinced the next words out of the Queen's mouth would be a call to proclaim her just that.

So, she broke and cried, as much out of fear as a pure plea for clarity.

"But why would they want to help? What do they get out of it?" Ember pushed back but her voice dropped, significantly, as her mother set those eyes on her again. That warning glare.

Ember braced herself.

"The same reason anyone engages in trade. To gain something they

don't have—"

"What do we have that Fae can't make or get themselves?"

Pain clamped about her face, swooping in with the speed of the sun's rays upon the night. Instant. Without resistance and with no relief in sight.

Ember yelped as her mother grasped her lower lip, twisting and digging in her nails. "You just can't listen and be glad for us, can you?" The words stung almost as much as the tearing of her lip. Wincing against the iron taste in her mouth as the flesh gave, she couldn't wretch her eyes away. "I've had to deal with you ruining all our agreements in the past! I won't let you ruin this one, do you hear me?" Teeth pinched so tight together they must have given, the Queen snarled, more animal than woman. "I will not have my rightful place…my Zadkhanûn …taken from me by my own child! If I have to take you out of the picture, I will, so help me!"

"Standing up...for my people." Ember's words slurred, her lips and tongue fighting against the grip her mother held.

"The people…" Laughter but without mirth rang in her throat. "What are the 'people' Ember? Peasants—metalsmiths, seamstress, gong farmers…cogs in a clock. One dies, one breaks, and there are dozens more to replace them, with nary a difference to be found. History won't know one from the other. But us…what about us?" The Queen released her daughter, pushing her back. "What about me? Me? Your mother? I went to the elves for you! Begged them to help me bear a child." Tears welled in her eyes and if not for the mask of loathing still settled over her face, one might have been forgiven for thinking them genuine. "Oh, how I wanted you. Prayed for you. Every night, my dreams..."

Ember rubbed her lower lip, silently trying to ease out the pain, but stayed still. Her mother rarely slipped into this type of mindset, but it did happen occasionally. Unfortunately, it was a dangerous situation to be in. She was never sure what direction it would take—anger or disappointment. Neither one ended well for her.

Helga draped her hands over Ember's face, tracing the edges of her cheeks with her nails. An invisible tattoo of ownership she carved with a false smile. "Do you know what my nights were filled with? I watched this time come over and over. When the opportunity came when our rule was guaranteed. When we wouldn't be subject to the whims and complaints of lesser folk any longer. When our destinies would be set in stone."

Ember winced, if not visible on her face then burning in her mind.

“What destinies? We aren’t anything without a people…”

“Have you become so lost?” Helga’s face contorted, raw rage coloring her cheeks red even as her skin faded to an off grey. A living death mask, a symbol of corruption and desperation. “Destiny to rule, to expand, to have the entire country under my reign. To remake Zadkhanûn!” Here, she frowned, her eyes darkened. “Oh, the things we could do with the water sources of Hilmgrim or the mineral deposits of Cobaj. And what do those kingdoms do with it? They squander it. Waste it, throw it away.”

“They use it to help their people.” Ember didn’t know why she still insisted on speaking the obvious. It was quite apparent her mother had her mind settled. But desperation had deep claws. “I don’t see that as wasting it.”

Silence. The only thing more dangerous from Queen Helga than violent anger was silence.

She stepped away, leaving the girl to stand stoic in the center of the room. Swift and cool as the winter breeze, the Queen drifted about, finally stopped before a mirror which seemed eerily similar to the one brought to Ember’s quarters.

Taller and made of a dark stained wood, so dark it was nearly black, framed with carvings of fruits, jewels, and stars. No faces, nothing like hers. Yet, they dripped with poison, shadow and deceit. Was her mother seeing it too? Or did it shift and change the appearance?

“So much we could have been.”

Drawn back to the moment, Ember licked her lips and took another step back. Dryness parched her throat. The ultimatum in that tone said much more than her words. “Mother?”

“So many dreams I had. Things we could do. Accomplish. We could make this kingdom into a mecca of riches, trade…a kingdom that would make Zadkhanûn seem like a peasant’s pig trough in comparison. A new Zadkhanûn—reborn more glorious than before.” Tracing her hand down the mirror surface, the glass under the Queen’s fingers turned stormy, cloudy, and violent. A thunderstorm barely contained beneath the glass.

“We could…still do those things, Mother.” Ember still withdrew, the rather distant and unpredictable nature and the presence of that mirror making her all the more uncomfortable. Her stomach churned. “I just… want us to do it for the people.”

“We work hard for those that earn it. Those that deserve it.” Helga turned, her skirts a wave pushing all around her away, leaving a cloud scattered in her wake. Her fingers tapped about her writing desk,

fingering quills, tools, and parchment before settling on the seal breaker by the lantern. "The fairest of all. I thought you might finally come to realize, but I suppose even my teachings cannot fix what's already broken."

Her fists curled around the small metal tool, gripping it as if to lose hold was to lose everything ever dear to her. She looked up, met eyes with Ember.

The Princess skittered back, a wee bit more, her fingers brushing the tapestries draped about the walls, crushing the velvet under her weight. "Mother…"

"I finally have a chance. A chance to make my kingdom what it *should* be. What I deserve it to be. And in you trot, blabbering about wasting our resources—magical resources at that!—on peasants that barely even know who's on the throne."

Ember kept quiet. Her thoughts raced, her palms grew heavy with sweat, and her heart went rock hard, but she held her tongue. Much as her spirit urged her to speak out, to scream about her mother's ill-intent damning a kingdom, seeing the wildness and unhinged passion in the eyes before her froze her tongue. Ember's eyes shifted, constantly, between her mother's face and the letter opener she was twirling about in her hand, over and over.

The Queen's heels clipped against the rough stone as she approached. Green eyes had gazed down her nose at Ember all her life, a fire within them, one caught aflame by power and discontent. With a low inhale of breath, Ember took another step back. Was she even a daughter to her anymore? Did that even matter?

"I see grand things. Grand opportunities. I'll be known like the Grand Sorceress of Jacon! Or the Conqueror of Grimma! When people speak of the proof of the Gods' form on earth, they'll look no further than me! When they declare to know what rebuilt and redefined Zadkhanûn, they'll look to me. It was mine, my bloodline's once and I'll take it back again!"

Her mother had always had a sense of entitlement, a desire to be known, to be renowned. Ember never really understood it; she was a Queen. What more could she want? Yet, here they were. And if her mother's wild eyes were any indication, she had her mind set on a goal, a purpose and nothing coming out of Ember's mouth was going to dissuade her.

Right now, Ember was a barrier to that goal and her fingers slid along the wall, in a frantic attempt to slip close to an exit. Why had she come

here? What did she expect to happen? When had her mother ever listened to her? When had she ever swayed her heart? *Stupid. Stupid.*

She'd thought maybe this would be different. No reason to suspect so but she'd relied on that potential outcome nonetheless. Sought and fallen victim to the lying deity of hope.

Ember's eyes drifted from her mother's face to the woman's hand. She'd watched the huntsmen long enough to recognize a difference in grip. Her mother's nails trailed the long metal tool. Carved to resemble a lone squirrel atop an acorn, the simplistic tool shimmered, an alien light flickering along its razor edge. As if calling to the blood it would spill soon.

Tyr, Jacob, where are you? Loneliness drowned her. *Daddy? Anybody?*

"I won't have you ruin my chances, Ember. Not this one. All the others I tolerated, hoped, and prayed you would learn from them. But if my heir is going to be blind to what's in front of her…perhaps it's better for me to have no heir." Her eyes glistened but not with tears. No, no, there was no emotion but only wild passion. "And with a Fae ally, I'll need no heir."

Light built in her eyes, but not a good kind of light. One not bound by any sense of morality. There was no warmth in it, only heavy purpose. "Oh, but the things the Fae might accomplish with heir blood, heir skin, heir heart. Especially one created with elven power…"

The mirror shimmered, crackling as if broken, yet remained solid and firm. The light from it turned the room cold and dark, dusting everyone with a coating of light grey. Trapped within a storm cloud, the cackle seemed to come from both room and throat all at once, a thunder crack of warning.

That was all the foreshadowing she received.

A swipe at her a moment later left a cut across her cheek and Ember darted to the left, tripping once. Her feet tangled in her dress as she rolled to her knees, the rough stone floor brushing light rashes into her skin. "Mother! Stop!"

The Queen maneuvered, her skirts following her lead as the sharp instrument cut the air again, trailing small threads from Ember's gown in the process. A sharp grasp of the wrist and the taller woman's weight sent the Princess against the stone wall, her head ringing at contact.

"I've got something better than an heir now. If you won't help me, I'll make use of what I can from you—"

This was her mother. Her Mother. How could this be happening? Ember sought her mother's eyes, desperation bleeding from her voice.

“Mother! Stop!” She begged the Gods for something—a hint of resistance, the tremble of an inner spirit fighting back, anything that might indicate anyone but her mother was in command.

All she saw was coldness.

But not spell-bound chill. The sort of mental night the deepest pits of the soul could paint, with the luster of anxiety and malice. One born of the desire to charge forward against all barriers, no matter the cost, for even a chance at achievement.

There was no mother in that gaze.

“Tyr! Jacob! Daddy! Anyone!”

Rocks, shifting and the sharp grind of stone on stone. Queen Helga paused in her rampage time enough to exhale but no more.

The stone behind Ember gave way, but not in a crumble. No. They parted, as if pulled by two hands and she tumbled into the emptiness that swallowed her whole.



Darkness consumed her.

An emptiness with the heaviness of fog and the weight of a thousand suits of armor ravaged through her body, from the ends of her nails to the deepest pit of her gut. She slumped to the floor, head bowed, and did not move, body heavy and limp.

No pain cut her, no throbbing pulsed through her skin, and her heart sounded once, twice...steady as ever.

Blinking, she opened her eyes on the nearly black corridor of stone. Not any stone tunnel she knew but one familiar all the same. Lifting her head, neck strained as hair draped into her face, her eyes struggled and failed to focus.

Human eyes required light.

Stretching out a hand, she ran her fingers along the wall in front of her. Muffled, she could hear ranting through the stone. Her mother's

ranting. While she quivered and shook and wanted nothing to do with that voice and all it represented, she pressed her ear to the wall all the same.

"I don't care what it takes! Tear the walls apart brick by brick if you must! Rush the dwarven keeps! Burn them alive to flush her out but I want her heart! With or without the body!"

"Yes, Your Majesty," said a low, hummed tone, one of obedience by force and not heart.

Ember pulled back, stumbled, and fell to her side.

Her mother.

Granted, they'd never had the best relationship. Always at odds over something they were, but still, she had faint memories of happier times. Of when she was a little girl and her mother would parade her about, proclaiming the mastery of beauty she possessed and 'that comes from me, naturally.'

It had been a glorious period, but oh-so-brief.

Can't you be serious and try to be a little less of an embarrassment?

Oh, Ember, why have the Gods cursed me with such an insolent child?

Just once, just once, I'd like you to listen and apply what you're told.

If being a Princess and ruler is what you desire to do then why do you fail so horrifically at it?

Was it truly surprising to hear an order like…like *that* come from her mother? She'd always wondered, in her deepest and most secret of hearts, that the woman would eventually tire of her and try and get a new heir. The elves had helped her once, surely reason stood they would again.

Daddy always said no.

But where was Daddy now? Why was he not rushing the halls, demanding no one listen to Mother's orders? Why was he not asking where she was? Why was he not whisking her away to his own chambers?

And where was she?

Gradually, she half sat up, glancing first to her left then her right, taking a sharp intake of breath as she did.

The stone was lopsided, as if made of clay left to sink into the river or warped metal too critically malformed to be of use. Had she a tongue for the mind-altering drinks her mother and father replied to, she might have thought herself intoxicated.

She had barely enough room to stretch out her hands. No, less than that. She held one hand to the wall before her and pushed her other

behind her back. Her elbow had to bend to accommodate the space.

Where was…?

"Ember?"

A voice, and a welcomed one.

She turned, scraping her skin against the rock and letting out a low yelp. Her eyes dilated and focused at the tiny bit of light presented to them.

Dwarves were luminescent and Tyr shone brighter than most. White as he was, it was like staring at a fallen star, still glimmering with the glow of the heavens. There was no wind, but his hair, loose and free, moved about as it took the place of his eyes in searching the environment.

His face was warm.

"Tyr?"

Cursing herself, voice cracked and feeble, she was much more fallen fawn at the moment than the Princess of her people.

"Tyr, tell me Mother didn't say…she didn't order them…to kill me? To bring her my heart? Tell me I didn't hear that."

Maybe her first response should have been more along the lines of where they were, how they got here, and why there was no exit to be seen but in the moment, she clung to any form of hope she could. If she could just pretend, for a moment, her mind had heard incorrectly, maybe that fiasco in the room could be cast aside to be a moment of drunken rage or the pressures of the throne finally resulting in a brief moment of insanity.

Because, surely, an insane mother was easier to handle than a callous one that cared not for her own flesh and blood?

Tyr's eyes stayed quiet and downcast. He didn't answer her because he didn't need to. He knew her well enough. She wasn't asking questions she needed answers to. She was simply indulging a fantasy, however brief, that her life had not shattered into glass shards.

"My mother, my own mother. I…"

As a reflection washed away with the flow of the river, Ember's own hidden desire—a smile of pride and joy from her mother, a laugh and hug full of happiness and content, a hidden tackle from behind as she saw the peasant women do all too often with their little ones—all washed away.

No mother that could order their own daughter's death held any love for her in their heart.

Her mind rejected it. Rejected it with every fiber it could and poured

as many lies and false interpretations into her sight as it could fathom. Anything, everything, to explain away this situation.

Ember let them wash through her mind, enjoyed the brief relief they would conjure but the false images were shot down, scattered with an obvious truth.

She was expendable. Useless, unwanted. A plague people were glad to be rid of.

Even to her own mother.

Especially to her own mother.

Whirling about, knees digging into the ground, Ember thrust herself at Tyr, her nails digging into his skin. The entire world was crumbling about her and she needed something real.

She clutched at him, burying her face into the crook of his neck. It had to be awkward, him hunched over so, allowing her to reach up to him. She hadn't bothered to rise from her crumbled position on the floor. She didn't know if she *could* rise.

Tyr just stood there, stock still and wrapped his arms tight around her, as if shielding her from anything else that might leave a mark on her heart.

His arms were tight, leathery, worked hard and callous from hours in the fiery forges. Hardly what one might think of if imagining a comforting presence. Not what the fairy tales spoke of in any event.

But Tyr was the only thing that made sense right now.

They sat there for a time. How long it was hard to say. With such news on her heart, Ember's entire world crumbled, died, and was born again in the span of time through which she took a breath. Each one heavy, scalding and ice in temperature, eating away at what remained of her.

Tyr's voice cut her hysteria, her heart breaking. "Ember, we have to get you out of here."

Yes. Yes, he was right. Regardless of her heart ache over her mother's order, if the rest of the court was as spell struck as she had been, they would follow that order. Every moment she stayed here, she was moments away from a knife.

"Where do I go?"

She scarcely recognized her own voice. Usually, she spoke out with confidence, especially to her people. If they had needs, if there was a conflict, if there was a problem, she was ringing in the resources to fix it. Clamoring for every spare hand to help Farmer Stephen's drowned crops. Gathering the maids to bring rags and torn fabric so the poorest of

the children could have new clothing made. Calling for them to speak out when they found her father's new taxes unfair and even rallying with them, shouting up at her parents until, with a face red, her father relented and her mother retreated into the palace with a face full of thunder.

Loss clouded her soul.

"Can't go to the people." Talking, did her mouth still work? It felt so automatic, as if she were under a spell again, babbling whatever came to mind. Her feet moved to support her as Tyr pulled her upright, keeping a grip on her hand. "If Mother wants me dead, she'll kill them if they even try to protect me."

And they had so much to lose. Their little ones. Their farms. Their shops. What little health they tried to hold together.

She couldn't ask such a thing of them.

And would they? What a thing to ask to harbor a Princess? And for how long? Until what changed? And from the Queen herself? Indefinite answers to all of it.

"With me, Ember."

Ember shifted to look ahead. Clouded by darkness, his face hidden from her, Tyr was guiding her down but his voice rang loud as stone was hard. "Tyr?"

"Come with me, Ember. You've been kind to us Dwarves. Let us repay it."



SHE WALKED.

Silently and with steady motion, one foot in front of the other. Her shoes clinked against the stone and wood amid the silent and dark tunnel, they echoed as thunder breaking a summer night.

"Ember, careful. The walls are thin here."

Wordlessly, she stopped, balanced lightly and removed first her left shoe then her right. Setting them on the ground, cast in a corner of dust, she adjusted weight onto the balls of her feet.

Loose stones and rocks carved into her flesh with each step. Under normal circumstances, she would have cursed or maybe scowled under her breath, but she swallowed the words of discomfort.

As they walked, the tunnel behind them closed. A breeze, cold and empty, ruffled her hair as stone merged into stone once more. The walls shifted, ever so, returning to their former positions.

Ember trembled. The tunnel was cold, but her trembling came from within. Blood curdled and swam with difficulty; her breath was slow and leveled yet her mind remained clouded, lost amid the moment.

"Tyr." She spoke; the words flowed clumsily from her lips, a rapid gush of syllables than true contemplated conversation. "What about Daddy?"

The white haired dwarf stopped, turned, and looked at her, "What about him?"

"If he's…you know he'd have to be under a spell to go along with this, right? I know he's not the nicest to you, but…"

He frowned. Maybe he shouldn't have been surprised, but he was. After all, Ember wasn't stupid. She knew danger when she saw it. The longer she stayed here, the more at risk she was.

So, why was she delaying getting away?

"Ember, your Dad could be anywhere in the castle. You're more likely to run into some spell-crazed servant out for your head—"

"My heart." She clarified, pushing her hair back. "It's my heart she asked for."

Raising a brow at her, Tyr had to admire that comeback. Reassuring, really. If she was making comments like that, maybe the shock was wearing off.

No. No, he decided. The look in her eyes was hardly of someone calm or collected. A frightened child stared out at him from a woman's eyes and he couldn't very well blame her. In a similar situation, he suspected he would have curled up in a ball and cried. Yet here she was, trying to problem solve even as her heart burned.

It would have been admirable if it wasn't so aggravating.

"What do you plan to do, Ember? You really think they would let your father wander about without some kind of protection around him? Your mother isn't enchanted so-"

"Exactly." Protest colored her words, her volume low. "Daddy would have to be. I didn't hear him at all when…earlier. He should have come running in if he was nearby."

"Unless he was enchanted to stay put." Exasperated, Tyr pushed his braids backward in a frenzied mess. "Look, I'm not trying to be an ass, but chances are your father's already been put into play for whatever part he needs to play. If your mother was even willing to do that."

He couldn't bear to say what he believed, truly. Ember had already endured enough today. Unfair and cruel for him to say the King was likely dead or cast away. She didn't need to hear that. Not yet.

Well, she did need to hear it but he didn't want to be the one to tell her.

"Daddy'll be in the throne room. He still thinks this is a usual alliance. He'd be getting ready to greet the guests. Or meet with their counselors. Or speak with the people about the new expectations. He's always working. He'll be on the ground floor. Let me go talk to him and he can fix this."

Tyr knew that look, that longing and hoping glance. The way she looked behind her, he pondered if she meant to bolt right then.

"Ember!"

"I'm coming, Tyr."

The silence was not convincing, and when her footsteps no longer echoed among the stone, Tyr whirled about. Invading light from the inner halls attacked his eyes, forcing him to squint and withdraw, his hair clouding his face a moment even as he fled into the shadows. "Ember!" He didn't shout but barely restrained the desire to do so. "What are you doing?"

"Daddy." It was all she said because she was darting down the hall before it fully left her lips. Heaving a sigh with all the power of an earthquake, Tyr nearly took off after her. But this was a different scenario than up in the halls.

He'd need help for this one.



IT WAS one of the more isolative halls, the ones that fed the kitchens and supply rooms. Servants should have been clogging the corridors with high profile guests in the palace, but not even the sound of late workers scrambling to sneak to their positions entered her ears. Not even the scratching of mice, seeking a single forgotten morsel on the ground.

Eerie, empty.

Ember ran, her weight once more on her whole feet, the flesh slapping against the stone in a sloppy ritual. Down the hall, past the kitchen, to the throne room. Daddy would be there because he had to be.

No matter what kind of spell had been placed upon the palace, her father's presence couldn't be ignored. They couldn't whisk his position away without recompense.

Find Daddy. Her mind was on a monotonous mantra. Find her father and this entire mess could be cast away. Mother might not…well, it may not end well for Mother but the rest of the kingdom could be spared. The people. The servants. Even the dwarven workers who depended so much on the income their crafts brought to them.

Daddy was the key to all of this.

Voice stilling, she ran through the corridor, her mind on the throne room. Her eyes would dart here and there to any open chambers, seeking the familiar visage of his face.

Throne room is risky.

She knew that, but sought to hush the voice in her mind, insistent on reminding her.

You are a target and you are in the center of the hunter's game.

But risk was the key to anything. It was part of being a ruler and she owed it to her people and herself to take that risk for a chance to undo all this treachery.

As she crept ever closer to the throne room, head held high and eyes constantly moving in a vain attempt to stay on guard, a voice caught her ear.

"Princess! Princess!"

Pausing mid step, she turned, seeking the source of the voice. It was fairly easy as she knew the tone well. It was the same voice that used to sing her to sleep or tell her stories or scold her for vanishing from her sight for longer than was deemed appropriate.

"Henriette?"

A hard slap cut through the air as a hand clamped across her mouth. Blinking, settling back, Ember almost lost her footing when a tug on the upper arm rendered her in the servants' quarters, tucked behind the kitchen, just outside the corridors into the throne room.

Squirming, the Princess threw off the hands silencing her tongue although she had the decency to realize they had slacked almost as soon as the door to the room shut.

"Shh." Henriette, her hair tied into a loose bun and anxiety painting her features, lay a single finger over Ember's lips. "Please, my dear, mind your volume."

Taking the slight command gracefully, Ember glanced about, finding her governess as well as two of the servant girls gathered about in a tight

circle. Nerves permeated the room, turning it an aura of cold and dark.

More than that, the eyes gazing back at Ember knew themselves.

"You're not…like the others." For all her formal training, words failed Ember at the moment but her crude assessment remained effective.

"No." Henriette paced. Though the woman was not normally one to be frazzled, her clear near-panic was evident. Posture slumped, her hands frantically wringing her skirt and the lines around her mouth and eyes—usually reflections of her life—now had burned scars of tension into her face. "There's not many of us."

"How?" Shifting from her governess to the younger of the servants, one that had come of age within the last three months, Ember demanded, "How?"

The girl, who went by the name Mia, and had hair of corn and eyes of earth, looked at Ember with pure confusion. "I don't know, Princess. Even Mother and Father have fallen to its spell. They wander as if lost." Tears threatened the girl's eyes and Ember's heart ached.

"It seemed to fall in the early morn." Fran, the other servant girl who had at least four years on Ember, shook her head, her brown braids swaying about like hunted birds amid the call of a hunter's horn. "Nearly as if it were waiting for the chime of the clock."

"But why us?" Henriette shook her head again. "Goddesses and Gods know. But why are you here?" She addressed Ember, her hands tightened atop the Princess' shoulders. "Have you not heard the Queen's commands? Mad, she is. Mad."

"Not mad." Fran protested.

Mia agreed. "She was always cold."

"Mind your tongues." Henriette's voice while soft in volume thundered in passion. "True or not, she is Ember's mother." Turning her attention back, the older woman gazed into the eyes of the Princess—a young woman she'd raised from her birth. The girl she had nursed at her breast when the Queen found it too bothersome and whom she had tried to raise with more heart than ice. "Child, she has put a prize on your head."

"On my heart." Ember shook visibly. "I've heard. But that's why I'm here. I have to find Daddy. He can fix this, I know he will. I can undo the spell. I know I can."

The room went still, the sounds of the rustling wind outside the windows breaking the quiet. Suffocating, the silence weighed on her shoulders like chains.

"Please." She said, taking hold of Henriette's front. "Just tell me

where you last saw Daddy and I'll fix this. I'll get him to fix it."

Closing her eyes, Henriette recited the Mother-Goddess prayer under her breath and when she opened her eyes again, they sparkled with unshed tears. "My dear girl, the King can't help you or us."

"Of course he can!"

Mia, stepping forward, took Ember's arm. "No, he can't."

"Daddy's dealt with invasions, traitors, and—"

"He's dead, Ember." Fran spoke it sharp and short, yet dotted with compassion.

Violent pain seized Ember, as intense as fire, as sharp as glass. Drowning amid its waves, the riptide crushed her. It was everywhere. In her chest as her blood became iron and then throughout her body, rocking her inwardly outward.

"…dead?"

"Dead." Thin fingers ran through her hair and after a brief pause, Ember turned to their owner, trembling.

Henriette heaved a deep sigh. "I didn't want to believe it myself, dear girl. But we found the King this morning, in the throne room. Cold. His breath still."

"Where is he?" Her voice squeaked, high pitched and disbelieving. "Where is my Daddy?" She pulled away and grasped at Mia, shaking her as best she could. "What happened?"

It couldn't have been Mother. No. No, she loved her husband. If anything was a constant, her mother had always loved her father. Hadn't she? Their fights were intense but they always resolved and could anyone fake the kind of smiles they exchanged? Though, granted, they had been less and less over the years. No. Not ever her mother would… she never would have let…

"We don't know." Mia answered. "We moved him to—"

"It's not important." Henriette interrupted with a look that could have melted iron to smoke at Fran. "We will see to it that he receives all the honors needed. The Goddess of Death will receive the due payment so he might pass peacefully to Her realm. But dear girl, you must go! Now! Every second you're here is a risk you cannot afford to take!"

"No!" Twisting loose, she ran at Fran, closing the distance between them. "Where's Daddy?"

"Ember—"

"My Princess…"

But Fran was not moved by the pleas of Henriette and Mia. Face solemn, she said. "We placed him in the prayer room. But there are

numerous guards—"

Ember did not listen. She ran. Tearing out of the room, she didn't think about how out of a whole castle of staff, men, and nobles, only three women had somehow avoided the spell. She didn't think about how many guards would be standing by the room containing the King.

She had to see him.

Why? She pondered briefly even as she ran and didn't even truly hear the sounds of others calling her name. She didn't bother to distinguish it was the weight of armored soldiers and drawn weapons whistling in her ears.

All that mattered was getting to her father.

The Prayer Room was a small chamber, all things considered. Unlike the other rooms in the castle which followed Mother's belief in bigger, grander, and more expressive, the Prayer Room was simplistic. Made sense, in most circles. The Goddess of Death had no interest in grand proposals or promises. All she desired were the proper words spoken to call on Her assistance.

Even so, the candles were lit and with the rare stained glass coating the windows and the small circular pattern carved into the door, the room carried a haunting otherworldliness.

"Let me enter!"

Screeching like a rabid cat, she thrust herself at the two soldiers manning the door, digging in her nails on the soft under flesh where their armor did not protect and pulled their hair, what little she could reach. She bit at the hands that clawed for her. She twisted and squirmed and fell to all fours and pushed the door inward even as they followed after her.

There he was.

Lying prone on the thick, black, velvet couch within the room, her father was still and grey. Scrambling to rush at him, with the soldiers rushing in just behind her, Ember made her way to his side, sobbing as she went.

The King's face was cold, sunken in, with the grey shade of Goddess Death's kiss all about him. His face was contorted in pain, a permanent mask of his final moments. As her eyes scanned over him, she found an incision in his throat, rather large in size and right next to him, resting upon the crushed velvet, was a single bite of apple.

She could see the skin, make out the bite marks of teeth slicing through outer flesh to rip away a chunk. Except this apple bite was not the fruit they'd all dined on last night.

It shimmered and refracted the light, sending rainbow colored mist through the room. As her fingers danced upon its surface, smoothness and cool edges made her nails tingle.

Glass. No, not just glass. A mirror. Her father's death had come from an apple of mirror glass.

"Take her! The Queen's orders!"

Numbness took her. Her father was dead. Her mother was a traitor.

What was the point? Why? Why had she been trying to creep away? Why? What did it matter? Wouldn't it just be easier to let Mother take her out? It certainly couldn't hurt more than the raging fever in her heart.

But what about her people?

It was a light spark within her mind, but it was one. If she didn't get away, her people would fall next. Fae were conniving. If something or someone didn't serve a purpose, they wouldn't last long.

She couldn't let it happen. Could she?

But it hurt. It hurt so much. How much more could she fight? She'd been fighting all night—first for her own freedom, then her mother, now for the right to see her father and now…now, there was still yet more to do.

She ached. Tiredness took her spirit with all the strength of an undertow.

The sudden *clink* and grind of stone was enough to get her to turn.

Cold steel thrust upward when the stone beneath her feet were no longer there.

She fell and the sheer closeness of the blade drew a light line across her cheek even as its tip went through the steel plates of the man grasping her arm a moment ago.

Thick, solid arms caught her. No, not arms…an arm.

Decorated with tattoos of indigo, in all kinds of designs, all in a language she didn't understand but written with runes she recognized. Skin textured as the facets of jewels were cut, dark blue—almost deep ocean blue in shade. The burly face coated in black beard and beaded braids. The dark blue eyes were reflected in his nephew's.

It was Maur, Tyr's uncle.

"*Lasku*!" His voice bellowed and shook even as he punched upward at the second soldier stabbing down at them. While the contact of flesh to blade drew blood, the sword shattered and when Maur's condensed fingers connected with the man's hand, there was a solid snap.

Broken pieces of bone cut through the man's wrist, poking through his leather vambrace as if they were not even there to provide any

resistance.

Dwarven strength, especially hardened by battle and forge, was not to be trifled with.

"*Lasku*!"

The thundering order made her bones shake and she stumbled to her feet.

Maur turned, grasped her arm, and pushed her forward, toward a long twisting corridor of black, with the hint of light many leagues down.

"*Lasku*!"

She need not know the language to understand.

She ran.



Even the power granted by the God of Strength in a moment of sheer desperation could only hold out for so long. As it was, Ember had likely abused the gift. Lady Luck was probably working overtime for her as well.

Whatever the reasoning, being dragged through stone, soot, rock, and flakes of various other minerals issued its weight on her feet. They hurt. Stubbing her toes became more and more common before she gave up and sat.

She could still see Daddy, in front of her eyes, even when she closed them. Who had told her the foolish stories of how death was a mere painting of sleep, that the death touch would not turn loved ones from what they once were? It could have been any number of the servants and she cursed them all for such lies.

The man lying on that couch had been a shadow, a sliver of reflection

of her father. So much she had taken for granted, the least of which was the act of being alive giving the body its grandeur, its allure, its energy.

Her father had been energy. Not always friendly but always exuberant, always full of passion and light. The pale, sickly grey form she'd come across had nothing resembling her father.

Her mother…much as she wanted to deny it to herself, the animated, callous, and determined woman that had declared nothing would stand in her way was very much in line with the Queen's persona.

The light shift of stone behind her caught her heart and breath in one stroke. Turning, her hair still clumping to her forehead from the sweat and panic, she scrambled to her feet, looking about for some kind of weapon. Anything she might be able to use to defend herself.

Unfortunately, tunnels made from stone, especially those carved by dwarves, were lacking in loose rocks, at least of notable size. With no weapons to her name, that left her bare hands.

Dried blood caked under her nails. It had been a minor annoyance to full grown knights, but it had bought her microseconds of time. Enough to get a final glance.

Daddy would be burned now, the ashes draped in honey and soot from the fire then taken into the deep chambers of the palace and offered to the Goddess of Death. The face she'd seen—pale, grey with splotches and bruises around his neck—was the last she would see of him.

Tempting as it was to just flop down and not try to resist any further, something in her heart refused. Her people. Her poor people.

But what good would she do them here? Shouldn't she be with them? Fighting back? Helping? Doing something, anything, besides running away?

Her heart sank. She wasn't a fighter. If the dwarf hadn't showed up, she knew where she'd be—slaughtered right next to her father.

Part of her longed for it and part of her was grateful. All of her was confused. Thoughts buzzed about her head like bees, sharp and unpleasant. Sometimes they lingered for a moment or more, long enough to sink into her mind and tear at her heart. Other times, they had come and gone within half a heartbeat.

Curling up tight as she could, yet still standing as tall as she could in the small tunnels, Ember gasped and whimpered. Her chest, tight and constricted, refused to relinquish tears.

A Princess did not succumb to tears, Daddy always said. She would not betray his lessons.

Large footsteps, thick and heavy, pounded down the corridor,

announcing the arrival of someone large and domineering.

Or at least, that was the image her imagination conjured up, spurred and spiced by adrenaline, fear, and despair. Everything within the past hour was rushing through her veins, flooding every speck of her body with uncertainty.

Yet, stand firm she did, hiding the terror within her eyes.

As the steps drew closer, she relaxed, her shoulders slumped as she recognized the gruff form of Maur. He walked quickly but not out of necessity. She couldn't see any pursuers behind him. Remembering the utter disaster a single punch of his had rendered on the knight's forearm, she shuddered.

One dwarf against a bunch of human knights—fully trained knights who had led their share of battles—and he was marching toward her with no scrapes and cuts to show wear.

And no one gave chase.

"M-Maur…" She swallowed and approached, knees quivering.

The dwarf male was large, at least by dwarf standards. He was about one inch shorter than she was, which pretty much meant he was a giant amongst the others. Amid the darkness of the tunnel, his dark blue skin had an otherworldly glow, more so than even his nephew Tyr's did.

Tyr reminded her of the moon. Not just any moon but the full moon on a clear night. Where the white light illuminated all and she could imagine it to be the only thing in existence. Soft, pale, and gentle.

Maur's light was different. As he walked, the luminescence he carried was pale, but a deeper pale. She didn't know if she really had a good comparison for it. When she let her mind drift to the stories sailors and travelers told of the deep oceans, the deep blue they spoke of—so deep it was nearly black—that was the glow Maur carried. She imagined a fish darting into the dark and cold depths would feel something similar.

It was cold and yet not unwelcoming.

So coated in tattoos he was, entire books' worth of markings drowned his skin. Runes and symbols, painted deep into the textured facets.

He looked at her, his eyes catching the low light from his skin, His beard and hair wove to and fro as if they had a mind of their own.

Sternness caught in blue eyes like the last drops of rain from a storm. Clouds painted his face and he rubbed at his fist, wiping away traces of the injuries metal and sword had inflicted.

"I'm…I'm sorry." Ember didn't know what else to say. She didn't know why he had come for her—she'd seen him in passing or heard about him from Tyr.

His eyes were truly the giveaway to who he was. While deeper in color, they carried the same hum as Tyr's. Impossible to hide.

After a moment, the older dwarf extended his hand to her, palm up. Hands painted in old scars and calluses, more so than even Tyr's, she expected it to be hard as wood and just as rough when she placed her own inside it.

That wasn't quite what she received.

Rough, yes, but there was softness to the grip, not the kind she could exactly define. It was not so much the physical softness so much as it was the emotional and spiritual sense of well-being.

She didn't know Maur and yet standing here, hand in his, her anxiety, her fear, her uncertainty dulled. Not because it was no longer there but more because if it were to rise and become a threat, this dwarf would help her.

He was here to help her.

"I'm sorry." She repeated to herself, looking him over. Her fingers slipped over the wounds opened on his hands. "I caused this and…"

This look was born from the heart and it cut through the cold in her soul.

. Emptiness. Coldness. A feeling of utter isolation and loneliness. It was not a physical sensation, it was deeper. It was one thing to be without parents. She had seen the pain caused by that all too often. It was another thing altogether to have been cast aside and baited merely as a means to an end.

Her usefulness had ended and with it, any devotion her mother might have had. Her father was no longer here to offer her the sliver of protection his presence might otherwise entail. Her governess and servants were trapped amid a wild castle of power-hungry madness and mind-numbed minions.

It was the deepest pit of aloneness she had ever experienced and she would not wish such a thing on the Gods of evil themselves.

Alone in the world with her thoughts and fears.

With the tightening of a hand on her shoulder, she stopped, rubbed at her face.

Maur gazed up at her. He said nothing, merely giving her a gaze of understanding. No false promises, no reassurances of a better day tomorrow, simply a look of 'I hear you.'

"Thank you." She didn't specify what the thanks was for and he didn't ask. Rather he gave a wave of his hand and walked ahead. Ember hurried after him.

She wasn't familiar with these tunnels. She'd not even been sure there were any entrances into the chapel. Yet, Maur had arrived. With the quiet about them rather uncomfortable, she asked.

"Did Tyr send for you?" Her voice still cracked and scratched her throat with each word.

Maur turned and looked at her for a long while, long enough Ember pondered if such a question had been appropriate. She'd not seen the harm in it, given the circumstances but then, maybe it came across as ungrateful. She definitely didn't want to give that impression. She owed him her life, quite literally.

But after a few minutes, right when she was about to offer an explanation for that question if he was in need of it, Maur spoke, a voice rumbling like stone through a grinder.

"Brother-Son Call. Heart. Come."

Broken Common was hard to grasp and Ember wracked her brain for any Dwarven she had picked up. It was a hard language to speak, namely because it lacked the fluidity of common. Half the time, it sounded, well, just as Maur spoke—short, direct, and with little elaboration.

"*Mes'un,*" She said it with hesitation, drawing on her experience hearing Tyr say it. She was fairly certain her tongue refused to correctly merge the syllables. "*Mes'un,* Maur." She wasn't sure if thank you was the proper way to address someone that just saved your life. Especially given the risk and wounds from it, it seemed insufficient.

The older dwarf broke into laughter. Not a rude sort of laughter, something she recognized by way of her familiarity with their race. "*Ja. Jaka*, Ember."

Jaka. That was a new word for her. She understood *Ja. Ja* meant you accomplished something and thought it to be appropriate in quality. She heard it exchanged among the forges frequently.

The tunnel before them opened, leaving the confusion of their conversation amid the shadows. Looking up, Ember caught stairwells and chambers leading to a room above.

Dwarves were streaming through them in droves. Carrying metals, dropping buckets. It was like watching an anthill upturned by a wayward foot. They streamed in lines, calling to one another with short phrases.

Converging, all of them descended toward a huge tunnel opening, this one in the ground. It looked like a big pit actually, like the ones talked about in the tales to scare children. The dark kind of opening

surely must have housed a dragon at some point, tainted with their greed and malice. The kind where even the shadows dared not try to flee.

Yet, the dwarves rushed it, jumping in and clinging to the walls, scurrying down without even a pause in their advance. Without such a drained heart, Ember thought she might have asked how they accomplished such a thing.

No time for that.

From above, the door opened, a simple trapdoor mechanism and a dwarf she'd seen darting to and fro on the workplace floor yet could not recall the name of, called down, this time in common.

"All's readied. Tyr is here?"

A low snort escaped the dwarf by her side and the one above repeated himself, or so she assumed, in Dwarven. Maur looked around, resting his fingers amid the tunnel wall. Shifting, he let his loose hairs sink into the dirt and Ember got the distinction she ought to remain quiet as something sacred and important was occurring. She'd seen Tyr do it, too, and …

Wait. Was this the Stone-Speak Friga had mentioned? She'd never gotten the chance to explain it but the way Maur moved and waited. It was as if he was expecting an answer to a question he hadn't even asked.

Or had he? How did Stone-Speak even work?

If that was even what he was doing.

The Princess heaved an internal sigh. She really needed her brain to slow down and stop jumping all over the place.

"*Suk*." Maur declared, breaking the quiet. He gazed up at the mystery dwarf and gave a nod. "*Suk*."

Sadness colored the air. Heaviness, not unlike the same heaviness Ember had endured when she'd laid eyes on her father, settled over the group. There was a nod, reluctant but firm, and then the dwarf vanished above, through the trap door.

Everything became fire.

The ground rumbled, trembled, a horrific shaking and popping and hissing erupted everywhere—above, below, around— it seemed to be all places at once and yet nowhere. Under the pulsing panic, she lost the urge to cover her ears.

The ground above them crumbled, giving way with large clumps of rock and dirt, quivering as they parted and slammed into the tunnel floor.

"Yie!" Her yelp came without warning when she found herself pulled

forward and looking at the ground when Maur tossed her over his shoulder. Being irritated was tempting but she'd not the time for it.

Maur was running. For all the dwarven short size and smaller length legs, they could move if they so chose and this did not change with age apparently. The older dwarf leapt and dodged over the falling rocks, took a twist to avoid a collapsing beam, and even crushed debris falling his way with a punch of his fist.

Now, she could see.

It was hard amid the fire and smoke, but despite the stinging bringing her sight to blurry tears, Ember could make out the familiar forms above her where she'd spent many hours watching the dwarves work or asking questions or on late nights, sitting and listening to their stories until she had to slip away to the upper rooms again.

The old workshop.

They were under it.

Flames licked the walls and sent the remains of those familiar forges crashing to the ground, sputtering out the last of their coals as they went. Iron and ore split and cracked, spinning around the tunnel floor with no direction.

Destruction, with shattering stone, melting lumps of rock and the supportive beams splintering into slivers of wood and iron, rained from above.

Ember gave a cry as pieces of hot ash narrowly missed her face, leaving a thin streak of soot as a mark on her cheek. Even as Maur ran, her forced to follow as his current luggage, she cried.

"Your workshop! The projects! The carpenters' toys and furniture. All that ore…" Squeezing her eyes shut against the stinging of smoke, she coughed as her lungs protested. "What happened?"

Dumb maybe to ask because as she spied the dwarves of every color and size rushing past them in the similar fashion, down into the pit, her eyes caught it.

Through the rustle and panic, she could see the fire spread from the middle, and the edges of the workshop. Where the largest of the forges dwelt. Those forges always burned white hot, but never so much as a spark escaped those ovens.

Unless they were permitted to.

Looking around, the dwarves cutting by her held no face of surprise. No fear, no uncertainty, not like the wild hysteria currently claimed home to her heart. There was sadness, a deep loss clung to everybody rushing past her, but there was no sense of unexpectedness.

They'd set the fire themselves.

"Why?" Her voice whimpered and sounded much more squeak than inquiry. "Why do this? Why do that to yourselves? What…?"

"We aren't fools, girl. And neither are you. Just flabbergasted."

The familiar voice made her heart sing. Turning as best she could over Maur's shoulder, her eyes fell on Friga. She was fussing, pushing some of the younger ones ahead of her, but simultaneously keeping up with the pace of Maur.

"Friga!" How desperate she must have sounded. How longing. But she could not find the desire to be ashamed of it. "Friga, why did they destroy the workshop? What's going on? Where are we going?" She paused, taking note of her inclusion on this wild exodus. "Where am *I* going?"

Those warm eyes were a welcomed flame to the coldness as they descended the large pit. It curled and twisted. Maur took the long curling paths, casting a look of disdain at the younger ones scaling by hand. Whether that was because of her or because he personally preferred rock beneath his feet, she wasn't sure, but she remained grateful. Despite everything, a jump down a deep, dark pit may have been more than her nerves could handle. The final crack in glass which led to shattering.

An odd path and yet Ember found herself equally curious and enchanted by its twirls and curves. It was reminiscent of the sea shells she had seen brought back from the shore. A twisted path curled in and in on itself before coming to a stop in the center. The center here, was the bottom, which seemed both far away and near enough to touch.

The further away they ran, the cooler the air became. It was far easier to breathe. Friga had yet to budge from her side, darting from view only occasionally, usually when she would give some kind of statement to Maur in Dwarven.

"We've always been ready to leave if we had to, Girl." She said nonchalantly. "You were our little buffer for the most part and as soon as we saw the kind of approach that Fae was taking—might have been taking—we were preparing." She gave a smile, one dipped and mingled with grief. "We've always got our kingdom in the mountains to go back to."

"Wait…" Mind rushing, Ember asked. "You all had another home beside the palace?"

"Always. Nice as those accommodations were." Sarcasm dripped off her every word and Ember could hardly blame her. It took all her efforts to get her father to treat the dwarves as equally as he did the laborers in

the stables. “We stayed for employment, not the environment.”

Confusion washed Ember’s face, coating her in a ruffled brow and downtrodden eyes to which Friga said. “We can make almost all we need. But to trade and exchange with others, we need gold coin. Your kingdom provided that. No more. So we retreat back home and plan for other employment options to fill our gaps.”

When Ember stayed quiet, Friga added. “The Stone tells us what we need to know, especially if it’s delivered from a hurting heart. Tyr’s call was all but deafening for you.”

Maur gave a low grunt and muttered something in Dwarven. Friga gently hit his shoulder. “And despite how rude Maur here can be when expressing it, we repay kindness with kindness.” Stretching up, she dotted the girl’s face with her fingers. “It’s your choice but come home with us, Child.”

Surprise, gratitude, and shock should have overwhelmed her. After all, she knew well enough Dwarven homes were not opened outside the Dwarven race. She knew not to even ask about the architecture of dwarven strongholds, even something as simple as what Tyr’s bedroom looked like in comparison to hers.

Yet, here they were, offering her sanctuary.

Her mouth stayed still, the dryness had turned her heart into a mere husk having invaded her tongue. Surely, she ought to say something?

But she stayed silent, clung to the dwarf’s shoulder as they moved and managed a light grunt in response. When she didn’t kick or squirm, they moved forward again.

Everything passed by in blurs, if it was by her tears or simply the manner of everything at once, it seemed all but the dwarf underneath her became fog and mist.

“Set her down, Maur.”

Coming to a stop, the older dwarf turned, feet grinding into the stone. Ember let loose a mild yelp, clutching to his shoulder despite having no evidence he would drop her. Not having a solid grasp on the ground was troubling regardless, being jostled about made it worse.

Friga spoke out again. “The risk of fallin’ rocks and being caught in the fire is up there.” Her voice pierced the air even amid the clamoring, running and scrap of leather on loose stones. Directing her finger skyward, she approached and offered a hand. “I think she’s more than capable of following a path.” She added a few words in Dwarven. Probably translating. Maur’s ability to understand the common tongue was definitely spotty.

After a moment, Ember found herself plucked down and set upright again. Maur gave a simple nod to her before leaping down the side of the pit, scurrying just as fast as the younger ones were.

Apparently, she had been the catalyst for his slow descent after all.

Friga's hand brushed Ember's arm. "C'mon. Ol' Friga isn't in such a hurry. Walk with me, Girl."

So they did.

Down. Down. Down. They circled the paths, ducking heads on occasion as the dwarves climbing from foothold to handhold leapt over them. Friga said nothing and Ember was glad of it. Making small talk was difficult for her during regular times, the prospect of having to do so now when her mind was racing and chock full of everything was nothing short of impossible.

Daddy was dead.

Her mind refused to shut up about it and despite trying to look ahead, to focus on the matter at hand, every step felt heavier than the last. Stumbling became her common gait with stopping far more often than necessary.

His image refused to leave her mind. The grey skin, the blotched neck, the sunken in eyes. The utter stillness. The soft, almost jelly like feel when she'd reached out, trying to gain one final touch but there was no warmth to it.

Mother was a traitor.

Mother had turned against her, enough to order her death, when all she ever used to talk about was how the elves had granted her an heir, a reflection of herself to endure and prevail when she was gone.

Then came along this Fae and offered her a world where she could have all those things on her own.

Maybe she was a fool for ever thinking otherwise.

With a step forward, she stumbled again and this time, she let herself sink to the ground, knees burrowing. Her hair, loose and wild, fell about her face, hiding her eyes.

"I should have listened." Voice catching, she looked at her hands, grinding them into fists, letting the pain of the nails in her palms settle then released them. "Tyr told me to go with him and I should have listened."

Everything swirled. Maybe it was wishful thinking. If she hadn't heard what her mother said, what she was thinking, what she was planning, she would probably be dead right now. Maybe that would have been better. Ember imagined it was hard to ache so much if she was

dead.

Inching her way lower to the ground, she laid there, looking like an odd sort of dead deer. She could still see Daddy. Could still hear Mother. Could still feel the utter emptiness from the eyes of everyone except a select few. Could still smell the utter fear Henriette had tried so hard to hide.

And through it all, her heart bled with every memory and thought.

Everything was small and large and condensed and wide and everything in-between. It was silent, but deafening inside her mind. Where was she, what was she going to do? What *could* she do? What right did she have to run and yet here she was petrified to go back. What about Emery and Timothy and Helen but what in the name of all the Gods could *she* do when she was at the business end of their own guards?

She'd never been so lost and so small and so insignificant.

She'd never wanted to collapse and sleep just so the pain would stop.

She was going to be sick.

Warmth caressed the top of her hand. "Feel." it said with firm authority and a moment later, her fingers seeped into rock, soil, and dust. "What do you feel?"

She didn't bother arguing with the absurdity of such a question. It was like she had little choice. The command, to feel, and the sudden new environment demanded her attention.

"What's it feel like?"

Weird inquiry and what a time but with nothing else to grasp, Ember took it. Anything that would center her, anchor her, help her to cease feeling this overwhelming sense of emotional drowning. "Coarse. Not like pepper. Less coarse than that."

"Hot or cold?"

"…cold. No, not cold. Lukewarm. Like the hearth after the fire is out but not long enough for the smell to disappear."

"And what do you smell?"

Smell? She'd not bothered to think about it, but with the pestering question, she stopped and inhaled, holding it like a whisper in her throat. "Mud. But like soil, too, like when you go and visit a farmer's field. Water, too. Not moat water, too clean smelling. Smells like it rained."

"Taste? What do you taste?"

Taste? She wasn't in a kitchen or sampling a snack. She felt half inclined to tell the voice that but her nerves were not quivering as much. Still present, still painful, but she had a grasp of herself again.

A loose grasp, but a grasp nonetheless.

"Do you think only snakes taste like that?" A laugh, warm and humble. "We all can, if we want to. Just have to think about what we're getting a wee bit harder."

Licking her lips, Ember paused, raised her fingers to brush them, leaving behind a faint coloring of soil. The odd iron taste of blood, bitter and sour settled on her tongue, and after prodding her lips a moment, the droplets came back, painting the tips.

When had her lips started bleeding?

Could have been any time she realized abruptly. When Mother grabbed her face, when she had bitten her lower lip to keep from crying out, the strength with which she'd bitten down as they ran away, fire raining down. Had she licked her lip when a stray ash had caught it?

Her vision steadied and she took a moment to realize she could see again. Her sight hadn't gone per say, as she had not injured her eyes nor did she recall any change of scenery. No, it had been more along the lines of sight becoming insignificant.

Friga was sitting before her, her rough hand on Ember's and the old dwarrow's gravelly voice centered the world. Of course, it would be Friga speaking with her.

"Are you with me again, Child?"

Blinking, Ember looked around, taking in the sights. While still on the twisting path, they were near the bottom and she recognized the rugged formations where she'd sank to her knees. Yet the light was different. Darker. Faint circles of whiteness and blue hue had begun to spring up amid the paths.

"What…Friga, did I go somewhere? I…"

"Here?" She jabbed a large finger into the girl's arm and clicked her tongue a few times. "No. Flesh didn't go anywhere. But this…" Her fingers brushed the girl's forehead. "You were driftin' here. Because you hurt here." She lay a hand over the girl's heart, centered and firm. "But Ol' Friga is with you."

It was a simple thing, a simple statement, but it seemed to pour strength back into Ember's bones. Stumbling as she stood, her hand went to the dwarrow's shoulder, leaning against it for support.

"The mind tries to help itself sometimes, my Girl." They walked again, slow but steady. "And if you've been dealt a hard blow, sometimes it has to run."

Run. Yes, it made sense. Hadn't she thought about that? Pondered that?

"But you called me back." Her voice was coarse, rusty like one parched with too much wine and left out to the wilds to seek water. "You called me back somehow."

"Rootin'." Friga shook her head. "Ol' trick but usually works. But you chose to follow me back."

Had she? She supposed so. It was so hard to make sense of things right now. Wading through a pool of emotions and each wave made her turn to lead and oil, sinking and rising all at once.

"I'm lost."

An odd, little declaration, but relief flooded her body at saying it.

"I'm lost, Friga."

A gentle stroke began on her hand and amid the blue and white light leading their way—perched on small wooden staves amid the walls—Friga's voice was stone, binding her to the moment. "I'm here, Girl."

The weight of her tone, the devotion of it, the unwavering truthfulness to it caused her voice to work again, still haunting, with stops and garbles of syllables when emotion overwhelmed reason, but it worked.

"I don't have Daddy. Or Mother. Or any of the soldiers. Or my governess. Or anyone. Or even Chester."

Friga didn't seem offended, merely stroked her hand again and said. "You have us. I suspect Tyr and Maur are waitin' not too far ahead."

Tyr.

"I should have listened to him. He told me to come with him and I should have gone."

"You were lookin' for hope. Sometimes we get rewarded for that. Sometimes we don't. Tyr isn't mad at you. Worried, maybe, but not mad. He darted 'bout the palace for a time when Maur ran to get you."

Don't feed me hope. You'll only choke on it. She'd not understood Emery's statement before but it rang as solid truth now.

Turning, her skirts swished in a way that reminded her far too much of Mother. She grabbed the fabric to silence them. "Why would he go up into the palace? I was already being an idiot. No reason for him to be one, too."

"Tyr sometimes isn't the wisest, true, but if he takes the time to dart around, he has a reason." Friga remarked with a light shrug as she pushed her braids over one shoulder. "And Maur wouldn't have let his brother's son run off like that if he didn't trust his judgement." Laughter, faint, filled her eyes. "Maur does not fear much, but the anger of his little brother is one of those few things. And his heart would never forgive

him if something happened to Tyr."

The long spiraling pathway finally gave way to flat, level earth. The space before them billowed out, spreading as much to the left as it did to the right and the ceiling above loomed so far ahead with the orange glow of the fire they'd left behind. It was the only indicator they were not gazing into the night sky.

A gentle bobbing, the sound of wood on water, filled the air and with an inhale, Ember caught the smell of freshness, littered with algae and water lilies. A rather odd thing to come across underground but there was no doubt that was where they were headed.

The dwarves traveled in solid rows, one after the other. Some carried baskets, some boxes, some mysterious other parcels. The eerie sound of Dwarven echoed in the chamber, making the Princess seem much like a withered daisy amid a rose bush—unsightly and something to be hidden.

"Ember." Friga used her name, a call for attention. "Don't you fret 'bout Tyr. You can ask him 'bout his reasons soon enough."

Grasping the woman's arm, Ember sank. "That's what I don't understand, Friga!" Confusion misted her eyes, leaving her dazed. "Tyr was talking about having to leave and yelling at me to come. Why would he…?"

The two of them wrapped around the corner as the groups edged closer to the water source.

And what a source it was! Ember had no doubt she could have laid all the towers side by side and their girth would not have matched this river. Large staves, not unlike the ones she saw walking down, were wrapped with leathers and glass, a faint blue light emitting from within. Not flame or fire, that much was certain, but something else entirely, much more constant, as resilient and assured as the moon on a clear night.

Rafts of ridiculous sizes drifted just on the water surface, creating a calming bubbling sound as they moved. Three larger dwarves, at least by their standards, were helping others aboard, urging the youngest and most vulnerable near the center.

But Ember's eyes were not on those.

As soon as they came into view of the rafts, she spied the familiar white glow of Tyr. There he was, looking a smidge crisp around the edges and Maur firm and strong by his side. The older dwarf was saying something to him then they rested foreheads for a brief moment and Tyr let out a nervous laugh. The kind of laugh where nothing was truly

funny, but it was better than wallowing in uncomfortable silence.

And sitting right by Tyr's side, hunched over and frightened but very much alert—

"Chester!"

Ember's heart ached and throbbed, but for an entirely different reason than before. Whereas before she was certain it was inches away from shriveling into a husk with no workable strength left in it, now, it was sure to burst.

Chester. Her ever loyal canine friend and nearly half as tall as any of the full grown dwarves here, had not been left behind.

Ruffled fur, tended wounds, but he was whole and alive.

Slamming to her knees with such ferocity, it was a wonder the bones did not crack, Ember screamed aloud, her voice crackling as if she was set alight by the sky's lightning touching the earth.

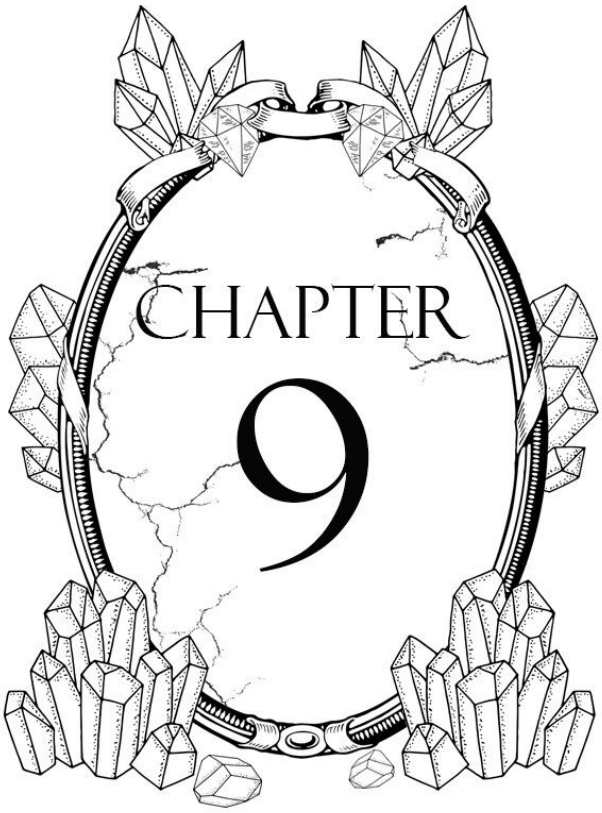
"Chester!"

The old dog, recognizing its mistress' call, stumbled to his feet and bounded toward her, his tongue out and ears flapping to and fro. He took little time to reach the Princess and smothered her face with his tongue, focusing on the areas where Mother's nails had left their scars.

"Chester." Wrapping her arms tight around the canine's neck, digging her hands into his warm fur, it was a solid rock to her spirit. Daddy was gone, Mother a traitor, the kingdom fallen, and her people imprisoned.

Yet, here her old familiar friend sat.

Tyr approached her, pain painted over his eyes. "Ember, I'm sorry I couldn't…with your mom and…" He shook his head, decided words were insufficient and said. "But you should have your dog."



Water passed below with soft murmurs. Ember let her fingers dip, tracing her reflection as they went. The raft moved along the river with a solid, but calm pace and Chester had laid down, resting his head in her lap.

Tyr and Friga stayed close by her side, various other dwarves crowded on the raft yet never quite made it *too* crowded. Maur and several of the larger dwarves moved the raft with long staves, gently rippling the water.

"Never knew this was here." Looking around, Ember found her shadow cast upon wide cavern walls, illuminated with the blue light from the raft lanterns. The river carried them down, the tunnel tightening about them until there was barely any shore to speak of at all, simply a

strip of water flowing toward an unknown destination and looming rocky walls.

Anxiety and uncertainty tangled within, tying the stomach and heart in knots. Her mind had enough fear from what had happened to last a lifetime. But the presence of the dwarves by her side meant no new tensions clouded her mind, merely reflections of old ones.

"There's a lot of things we didn't tell you." Tyr winced, almost looked apologetic. "I mean, it wasn't anything personal, Ember, just, it was—"

"Not angry, Tyr."

She meant that, too, genuinely. Maybe a few days ago she would have taken it to mean offense, but she could hardly claim such a thing now. "I should be the one saying sorry. Everyone having to flee, it's because of me."

"Foolish tongue-talk." Friga said, a deep rumble to her voice. "This is no more your fault than it would be your fault if you got struck by lightning." She gave a light squeeze to the young woman's hand. "Blame who there is to blame. Blame the Fae. Blame your mother."

Friga did not press any further, letting silence reign. Ember made no more claims about guilt and the river carried them ever onward, increasing a touch in speed after a time.

The dwarves lay on their backs, on their sides, chatting with one another, sleeping or telling stories in their own foreign tongue. No sense of urgency, despite the rapid escape from the upper level of the palace they'd performed. One might be forgiven for thinking it was a simple relaxation journey and not an evacuation.

The tunnel they drifted in had shifted from a wide open space to smaller and more precise. As Ember let her eyes take in what little light they could from the small blue lamps, she found herself marveling.

"This isn't nature-made, is it?"

Tyr shifted, rested his chin on a propped up knee. "What? The tunnel?"

"The tunnel, the river, all of it. The Goddess of Nature didn't create this."

Friga asked, without even lifting a brow. "What makes you say so?"

"Too precise." Rubbing Chester's head absentmindedly, she pointed. "Stone usually doesn't form like that." The sides of the tunnel were smooth, polished, and clean. "Not like this anyway. Too smooth."

Friga smiled, but gave no verbal response.

"I mean, I'd expect to see rough patches or something but this—" Letting her eyes dance about the waterways, she marveled at the

reflection in the water, the ripples fracturing the clear coloring. “It’s too deliberate.”

“Good eye.” Tyr settled next to her and after a moment let his fingers rub Chester’s fur, sorting through it, giving the canine a gentle massage. Occasionally, the dog would whine in pleasure, but that remained the sole sound for many a ways. This was odd to be discussing, especially with a non-dwarf, but if it took the mind away from the calamity it had survived, all the better.

Several dwarves gathered at the mouth of the river as it passed from one cavern to another. They were muttering, talking in Dwarven and then the sharp sound started.

It was hard to describe. Grinding, twisting, cracking. Yet, there was no visible source. In fact, Ember was close to assuming she’d imagined it when Friga spoke, as if seeing the interest and confusion in her eyes.

“Don’t use your eyes. They’re pretty useless down here.”

Frowning, the Princess diverted her sight downward, gazing at the water and closed her eyes softly. *Okay, don’t use your eyes. Ears seemed the next best thing.* Settling, she took a breath and let the noises flood her consciousness.

Rock. It was definitely rock moving. Then, there was a bubbling, flowing, rushing sound. Water, moving with force. The raft bobbed to it, from the rear to the front. Fluttering and scampering, too, the sound of animals rushing away, claws and wings outstretched.

Letting her eyes open again, her sight was blurry a moment, but with the sound to divert her focus, it didn’t take Ember long to find the source —the large cavern walls had slowly slid shut behind them, merged and fused as if there had never been an exit from the cavern to begin with.

Had she not seen a similar thing occur when Tyr came to pull her from the Queen’s chambers, she doubted she’d have believed it.

Even now, without the aid of her ears to convince her eyes, she didn’t find it entirely possible yet it was happening.

Chutes to the left and right spilled open without so much as a whisper and water pooled in, replacing the liquid blocked with the sealed off pathway. It gave off a holy shimmer amid the cavern’s low light, as if doused by diamond. In fact, no, more than that. There were diamonds *in* it!

There was no other explanation for the thousands of tiny lights that seemed to catch the smallest flame and reflect it back. It wasn’t quite the light of the stones Ember was familiar with but carried a more somber and cool shade. Not quite sapphires but the glow was similar in hue.

Thousands and thousands of them spread as they hit the river and flooded through it, carrying tiny lights as they went.

Before long, the cavern was almost as bright as the forest under a clear moon, with even the rowers taking the time to blow out the blue lanterns. With a path made by the river itself, glowing specks making designs as they went, in the forms of dwarven runes, before scattering and forming a new design.

She smiled. A soft smile, one without the usual light she was known for. Weight of the day dampened her eyes, casting its long shadow about her spirit. Yet, with the warmth of the voices around her, she pulled a smile from her heart and while it was cracked, trembled, and would have crumbled under the strength of a leaf, it was a symbol her inner light had not died.

The river pulled them onward.



SHORE WAS A WELCOMED SIGHT.

There were no trees, no bushes, nothing that resembled the ambiance she usually associated with the meeting of earth and water. As she looked around and let her feet slip onto the solid ground, she took in a breath.

No sense of air or breeze. No sweetness of flowers, no lingering scent of rain. Despite that, it wasn't without smell. Musky really, as if the clouds had dropped to the ground and coated everything with water and mist. The further they traveled, the weight of the atmosphere had grown, beyond anything she'd experienced before. As she stood, the air pressed upon her on all sides. Cleanness ran through her nose—not quite like the feel of the world during a storm but more after, when the sun reappeared and coated everything in warmth again.

Unusual, unexpected, but not at all unpleasant. Taking a step forward, her fingers lingered on Chester's neck. The poor canine remained by her side, walking with his head down, nose moving constantly. "Lots of new smells here, huh, Chester?"

With a sniff, a sneeze and a shake of the head, the dog barked low once. Continuing their trek, Ember let her eyes drift up.

A solid wall loomed over her, so far above it seemed to vanish into

the unseen sky, yet winding as far right as it did left—turning and curving so the two directions became one, a single circle of rock and stone, solid and complete. Save for a collection of round tunnels carved into it, all at the base, the looming barrier was complete and impassable.

The tunnels called out to the eyes, bright and full of condensed light. As a lantern contained under a mask, rays of light diluted, held close to the entrances, giving enough of a glow to draw attention yet condensed enough one felt a desire to creep closer, to grasp at the escaping light. It was not like sunlight, it was not moonlight, it was not starlight nor the glow of a fire. All of those things together and yet none at all but it was an intoxicating presence. The desire to run for it nearly sent Ember scurrying ahead, feet slapping the rocks, decorum be damned.

But she would not have known what tunnel to take. There were so many, like the holes gnawed in old wood yet no indicator of where they would lead. The entrances loomed before the eyes, inviting and warm, large and round, probably three dwarves high and four wide. As the other rafts landed ashore, dwarves headed into the tunnels without delay. Given the similar colored groups, maybe it was families, each taking a specific entryway.

Of course, that left her standing at the apex of the gathered pathways, Chester waiting patiently by her side. For a time, she stood there, quiet and still. Contemplating. Considering, wondering, and questioning.

Odd as it was, this was the final step. Despite the lengthy way they had come by foot and water, there was finality to this moment. While she had walked, being swept about, willing as it was, there was a spark within her mind, a thought, an inkling maybe it was all a dream, a passing moment of horror came within the night to lay plague to the imagination. Yet, with the gateway to the dwarven kingdom in front of her, the hard stone of reality pulled her down. After this, there would be no pretending, no more lying to herself, no more hoping for a different reality.

Voice quivering, shaking amid the nonexistent wind, she dug her fingers deeper into Chester's fur. "Where do I go now?"

It was the second time she'd asked that in so short a period but the gravity of the words was drowning. As much as she liked to pretend and laugh about how prepared and strong and mature and wise she was regarding what to do, it was a fancy lie. She was at a loss. She didn't know how to cook for herself, at least not well, and the many lessons on court and decorum she had suffered through were useless at keeping one warm. How would she know how to stay dry? To gather enough food?

What would she do if she got sick?

She had thousands of questions, no answers, and she was alone.

A hand slipped into her free one and gave a light squeeze.

Turning, she was met with Friga's dark eyes and Tyr's grin. "Don't worry." the boy said. "You could come home with me!"

Friga scoffed. "And where would she sleep, can I ask? Your family's generous and I don't doubt their heart, but have they the space?"

Ember's thoughts turned to that as well. She didn't know too much about Tyr's home life, but she knew he had several siblings as well as at least two uncles and three aunts all living under the same roof—or whatever dwarves used for such dwellings.

Tyr winced. "I…well, we could make room."

Friga set her eyes on Ember, voice soft. "The choice is yours, my girl. Friga has room for you without the constant interruption of family members alien to you." There was a light heaviness to her words. Ember had suspected Friga didn't have children, but given how much dwarves spoke about their families, the prospect of her having no family at home had never occurred to her. The offering was sweet and one of the few options available to her, as she didn't exactly have real estate in the dwarven kingdom.

Numbness still dictated her heart.

"I…" She swallowed. "I don't know what to do."

It was the honest truth. She didn't know what to do. Everything had collapsed around her today and while she had clawed her way to the top, fighting and screaming, exhaustion was the word for her.

"I don't know what to do."

Nodding as if understanding, Friga spoke. "'Course. What are we thinkin,' askin' such things right now? How 'bout you stay with me for tonight, my girl or for however many days you need. Let Ol' Friga worry 'bout the food and the warmth and the cleanin.' Then, when you're ready, you tell us what you want." Patting the girl's hand, she said, "Tonight isn't a night for doing a lot of thinkin'. When the heart's burned out, the mind follows."

Friga's voice sang firm, yet compassionate, something Ember had always appreciated from her, yet never really realized how much it soothed an aching and frightened spirit until now.

Tyr wrapped about the two, taking up Ember's other side. "I think that's a good idea. I can talk to *Nanki* and *Manki* about everything and see what we can do. We can talk to the craftsfolk about clothes and shoes and—"

Friga reached out and gently tapped the boy on the forehead with her knuckles. “Boy. All well and good but don’t overload the girl.”

“..right. Sorry.”

As if slipping from a fog, Ember asked, “I…won’t be bugging you, Friga?”

“Oh, come now, my girl. If it was goin’ to bug me, do you think Ol’ Friga woulda offered?” Giving a gentle touch to the princess’ cheek, she said. “Since when does Friga keep her mouth shut if somethin’ doesn’t please her?”

“When does she keep her mouth shut at all?” Tyr remarked, purposely loud, and when Friga directed dark eyes to him, he gave a sheepish grin in defense. Looking to Ember, disappointment took his look when she remained still, with a stoic, faraway gaze. “Sorry. Was tryin’ to make her laugh.”

“Don’t feel much like that.” Ember wrapped her arms about herself. “But thanks for trying.” Turning to Friga, she said. “If you’re sure, I’d definitely appreciate the bed. Can’t say I’d be much for a meal…”

“We won’t worry about the meal tonight unless your belly changes its mind.” The dwarrow directed her attention to Tyr and an odd urgency lingered there, just below the surface. “Tyr, why don’t you show her the main hub while I get things settled? Harder to feel out of place and lost if you know where things are. I’ll meet you in the main halls when I’m set up.”

Nodding with all the seriousness of a warrior informed that the very existence of his kingdom relied on his completion of this given task, the dwarf turned to Ember and offered his hand. She took it after a faint hesitation, returning his light squeeze when he offered it this time. “Be glad to.”



SHE WALKED, he walked.

Gazing upward, she marveled at the tunnel walls. Once they’d slipped in the one to the far right, she had become lost again amid awe. It was truly an odd feeling. Her heart and body ached with pain and loss and grief, but they could not reject the wondrous emotion of pure ecstasy when faced with art beyond measure. Craftsmanship had always carried

a power over her and tonight, she ran for the feeling, even as fleeting as it might be.

The dwarven tunnels (which Tyr informed her were called *Kukus* for 'into and out') carved and decorated, but were not like the tunnels of the river. Those had been marvelous themselves, painstakingly cut and cleaved. These pathways outshone them in every way. Plated with tiles of the deepest white and silver, meticulously placed and even as flat as they were, the light caught their facets, giving an odd glow to the whole place. It was as if the moon were sitting on their shoulders.

"Is this...diamond?" Asking, she ran her finger down its surface, marveling at the smoothness that greeted her touch. If the smooth surface of a pond could be made dry, she was feeling it. When she pulled away, panged with a sense of guilt, she stared at her fingers as if her touch might have marred an otherwise flawless surface.

"Yeah." Tyr shrugged, apparently immune to the reverence which had all but possessed her. Several times, he looked at her with the amused expression of one watching an infant discover their toes for the first time. "Not the best of the tunnels, but it works."

Not the best...she used to dream about places like this. No, not even that. Even her imagination, broad as it was, had never pondered using diamond to lay surfaces. Never had she considered the mosaic tiles of the palace could have been carved from precious stones. "It's beautiful." An understatement but all she could manage.

Looking over his shoulder as he stayed slightly ahead, Tyr grinned. "I bet you could make tiles better looking." Maybe a bit heavy handed but a bleeding heart needed support and comfort so may he be forgiven for perhaps layering on the well-being with his words. Stop the wound from bleeding, then worry about the scars.

"Me?" Oh, she would have laughed if she had the emotional energy for it. She settled for shaking her head. "Me…I…." Her voice caught again and she found herself slurring, tongue and lips cold and limp.

"You ever tried?"

There was no tease in his voice. He was perfectly serious. "Well, no..."

"Then don't downplay yourself. We all have skills. Some buried, some apparent, some come to light with some sanding and polishing. I bet yours outshine these any time."

Looking at him, she searched his face for lies, but found none. While not necessarily embarrassed, she wasn't quite sure what to make of the emotions bubbling in her body—confusing as it was without the scarring of the day, she rubbed the back of her head. "Are you trying to flatter

me?"

Giving a light and embarrassed grin, Tyr grasped the back of his neck and rubbed the braids bound tight to his skin. "Not purposely. I mean it. You always looked like you wanted to jump into the forge yourself."

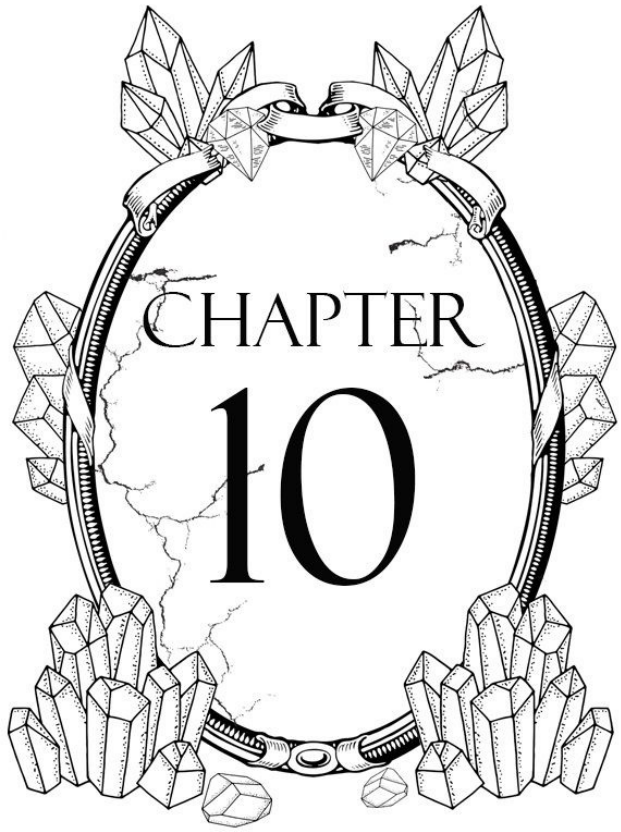
"I'd burn myself."

"At first, sure." Lifting his hands, Tyr ran his fingers along toughened and discolored sections of skin, mainly on his wrists and fingertips. "Took me a while to learn. But you've got the mind for it."

He left it at that as they slipped their way out of the tunnel and into the wide open cavern.

Ember stumbled, lay a hand on the wall and looked from the left to right, from down to up, all with her mouth open and her eyes so wide they stung from the muscle strain. "This…this is the Dwarven kingdom?"

"Ours." Tyr corrected and waved his hand outward, getting a wee bit showy in his presentation. "There's others, too, all over the mountain ranges but this is mine. Ours. Welcome to the Kingdom of *Nodrog*."



If the outer walls had been impressive then the city itself was beyond measure. They emerged into a chamber easily the size of the palace, probably at least three times larger. Cavern walls littered with holes branched into carved paths of wide variety—archways, stairwells, roads. Rocky paths crossed this way and that, over and under one another, connecting one side of the cavern to the opposite way. Steps carved directly in the walls itself created a means where one could scale upward or downward if taking the roads was too much of a hassle.

In the walls, sparkling and shimmering without light, were some more of those lantern stones except they weren't limited to blue. These were every shade, each one illuminated a wide spread of the landscape, with the colors merging and mixing as they drew close together, swirled and twisted as if caught in water.

Within the walls, the bridges and even the floor were deeply intricate designs. Some of them were recognizable as moons, stars, suns, and flowers. She also recognized common weapons—axes, swords, bows, daggers, but scattered among them were runes in dwarven. Hard to say what they meant but the formality was clear.

Statues served as the keystones, large pillars holding the bridges aloft. Carved fingers wrapped around the stone walkways, carved deep and precise, each one with a detailed finger nail, hairs about the neck and even individual eyelashes. She could count them. As she gazed about, she spied tilted ears on some, long beards on others, longer fingers…the statues were representations of dwarf, human, elf, and others she did not have a name for.

All coated in silver, gold, copper, and so many colored gems it was impossible to count.

Throughout it all were dwarves, darting in one tunnel and out another. In contrast to the diamond entryways, colors of all sorts decorated these entrances—blues, purples, greens, oranges, yellows and even several openings with fractals of all kinds of shades. Each one must have been a direction of some sort or an indicator of the type of destination.

Or maybe the dwarves had that memorized and they just liked to show off.

"Tyr! Was wondering when you'd make your way in amid all the hustle!"

Caught off guard by a voice she didn't know, in a much higher pitch yet still quite masculine in tone, Ember lifted her head to find the source — a dwarf. Seated just to the side of the tunnel they'd exited, perched by what looked to be a large wooden wheel amid chains and pulleys, the male dwarf gave a wave of welcome. He leapt down at the first opportunity and lifted Tyr up, twirling him around before setting him back down, hugging him tight.

If Tyr was starlight given flesh then this one was sunset. Skin burned a fiery red, the inner dwarven glow causing an almost flush appearance when he pressed against Tyr. It gave the younger dwarf's skin a blush, as if he was dusted with the dying sun's rays. This new dwarf wasn't the vibrant red she usually associated with the shade but more the darker hue when a rose had passed its prime and was headed for wilting. The dark black he'd used for the tattoos decorating his upper arms and face added to the imagery. With a head full of orange curls tamed into tight braids dancing with every movement, it was a wonder she didn't get the

ends of one to the face. Beads decorated his beard but he was the first she recalled seeing without elaborate braids.

"Bofun!" Pulling away, Tyr took her hand again. "Bofun, this is Ember."

Their eyes met for a moment. Taken aback, Ember resisted the urge to step backward. Gold was such an odd color and to see it in the eyes and combined with the red skin, it carried such intensity, like the sun was contained in the root.

"So, this is the girl you talk about so much." There was caution to the tone, an uncertainty. "Definitely wasn't expecting her to come along with all of you. When they tol' us it was an evac situation, we figured just get ready to seal the tunnel once the last person reported." He thumped the wheel. "But, if she's here…"

"I'm not here to cause trouble." It seemed almost silly to say because how could her words have any bearing on all the politics ruling here? "My mother…she…"

"Queen's a bitch, like I said." Tyr chimed in and despite it all, Ember bristled at the term, despite its accuracy.

But she held silent.

"Wondered how long it would take for her to show off her real colors." Bofun folded his arms and twisted one finger in his beard. "So, you made your way out, eh?"

Ember nodded. "Thanks to Tyr and Maur and Friga and everyone else." Her knees trembled. "Thanks to so many people I'm alive." She reached inward, dug into her soul for more words but it seemed like those had been all that remained. Her voice went taut then silent, no matter how hard she tried.

"Gotta say I ain't heard nothin' but good things about you, Princess."

Ember eyed Bofun, not critically, but rather with an air of curiosity. She'd never seen him amid the dwarves coming to and fro for shifts in the forges. Looking him over, he had much more body mass than even Maur possessed. If his duty was to seal off the tunnel when necessary, didn't that make sense? Those large wheels were almost as big as he was and their gears and pulleys dwarfed them all.

He had to command all that?

"Can you really move all that by yourself?"

As soon as she'd said it, she cursed herself. Here he was giving her a compliment and her first move was to question his fitness to a position he obviously took pride in. It was hard to disguise the love one carried in their eyes when reflecting on something they found meaningful. The way

he'd lifted his head just slightly mentioning his profession, the subtle thrust of chin and puff of chest.

And here she was, spouting off language that sounded, even to her ears, as doubtful and maybe even snippy.

"I'm sorry!" Babbling seemed to be her method of conversation lately and she was quite fed up with being fluent in it! Her tongue and brain seemed in flux, one working without the other's consent far too often. "That came out wrong. I just meant for as short as you and —no, that's wrong, too!"

Growling under her breath, she grasped at her head, cursing her inability to form a coherent sentence. Anger and sadness ebbed in her veins, contorting her face into an ugly mask. Her throat choked, but she swallowed the tears away. What good did tears do? It wouldn't undo anything, wouldn't bring her father back.

She certainly was making a fool of herself right now.

Bofun offered her a soft look, though. It wasn't a smile, yet there was a sense of warmth and comfort to it. If the feeling of a fireside seat with a full belly on a winter eve could be embodied into a gesture, it was that which gazed upon her.

"You fret this much normally, Princess?"

Odd enough, the inquiry didn't bother her as much as she imagined it likely should. Bofun's voice never rose and it had lost the distrustful edge he'd possessed a moment ago.

Shaking her head, her words turned to dust in her mouth. Effectively rendered voiceless, she shook her head back and forth harder as if that would provide explanation.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Just like Mother always said. Stupid.

"She's—"

"Emotionally spent." Bofun's voice put Tyr's on pause. "I can see it." With a low sound in the dwarf's chest, one that tumbled up to his throat and yet couldn't quite be called a laugh, he grasped the wheel. "And I surely can, Princess. Care to watch?"

Again, she twisted her tongue, sought to kick away the ash and dryness that had invaded her body since getting off that raft, save the few words she'd exchanged with Tyr.

It made no sense to her. Yet she couldn't find the energy to spend much time on it. So, she stared, like some kind of fool. What was wrong with her?!

Anger bubbled up, at herself, at the situation, at life, at the Gods. At anything and everything and at elements she didn't understand. All she

wanted to do was scream and yell and curse, but again, what good did that ever accomplish?

The desire to engage in it did not dull.

Daddy had always said the image of a Princess was her most vital weapon. It was with her image she could command. No tears. Happiness, yes. Pleasure, yes. Anger? Yes, quite useful in showing might and power. That was how one kept rebellions at bay.

But sadness? Fear? Tears meant someone could pull her down, invade her weakness, manipulate her defenses. Always and forever, a ruler must be stoic and firm. People respected a face showing strength and power.

Remember our Gods? He always said. *Those who command hold their emotions within. Those who were fool enough to unveil themselves were thrust into servitude, into positions without command. You are a blessed child, my Ember, born from the ashes. You've the ability to get strong and firm and hold our kingdom strong.*

She'd never agreed with such things. Always found them completely foolish but with her father not even gone for a sun and moon yet, a part of her clung to his words. Silly, maybe, but with only his words remaining, what could she do? If she cast them aside then what did she have left of him?

But she couldn't find the strength he had in spades to respond. So, she lifted her head high, eyes glistened under the odd light and prayed for strength. If remaining silent was what she needed to do then that's what she would do.

Seemed rude, but when faced with little options, she grabbed for what she could. Being silent might be all she could manage right now.

What had the dwarf called it? Emotionally spent? What was that? Emotions weren't coin or gold. How could she be emotionally spent? A part of her wondered if it would explain her frustration, her short fuse and the lack of hunger yet desire for sustenance. And her tongue's inability to be coherent.

Maybe she ought to ask? She considered, ran her thoughts and memories and strived to open her lips and do just that. After all, wasn't she always the one to jump in with her mouth flying without care?

Mind and tongue still weren't talking very well.

Bofun stood unaffected by her stance, at least not openly. "Ah, maybe not tonight. We'll have time tomorrow for more talk. I'm sure the Council will want to talk too."

"The Council?" Tyr's voice cut the air and his body stiffened. "Why's the Council got to stick their noses in on this?"

Scowling, Bofun directed a rather heated reprimand. “Mind your tongue. I know they aren’t your favorite people, but they haven’t done anything against you. Don’t shower them with disrespect.”

“They’re stubborn and in love with their own ideas.” Folding his arms and jolting his jaw into a sharp angle in a nod for emphasis, Tyr countered. “Why does it matter to them Ember’s here? She won’t hurt anybody.”

“History.” Bofun addressed Ember personally. “Nothing to fret about. Council keeps everything runnin’ here so they’ll just need to know you’re here and why.”

“If they don’t—”

“Why don’t you show her the important places? Like the market? Maybe get some food in her?” The question was not a question. “No need to fret on the Council. They might be stubborn ol’ folk but fairness and kindness is something all Dwarves value.”

Ember pondered briefly if this had to do with what everyone always slandered dwarves on—their supposed abandonment in the war. She didn’t believe it. Less now than ever. But this council poured cold fear into her veins. Tyr rarely reacted like that to people. If he was worried, she had good reason to be, too, despite Bofun’s reassurance.

And given how people treated dwarves, including her own kingdom, she didn’t exactly have a working memory of their past events.

She had a feeling they perceived things more than a little differently.



TURNED out that while Dwarven beds were odd, they were not uncomfortable. Small round pits dug into the ground, like an upside down anthill and coated in blankets, pillows and loose moss or feathers. Sides coated in some type of sealant that kept the dirt and mud from slipping and sliding. Friga had led her to one deep in the back of a cavern. The door, if one could call it that, was a large boulder Friga slid aside as easily as Ember might toss a book upon a bed. Inside, the cavern was spacious.

Some of it was familiar—the areas for eating, for reading, bathing. At the same time, it was all foreign and empty. So utterly different from anything else she knew; each step felt like a slip deeper into a dark pool.

Lonely and uncomfortable, with the twisting feeling in her gut growing ever stronger by the hour.

Tyr had shown her the market but her tongue and belly refused anything except water. Even then, she found herself sipping it gradually, a vain attempt to cool her lips and throat and coerce them to cooperate. So far, that had been minimally successful.

Chester by her side was one of the few anchors she possessed.

The old dog had taken to the small bed quite easily, turning three times before curling into a ball. It was certainly an improvement from the cold stone floor and thin blankets Mother insisted he use, not willing to waste anything better for him. A light shadow of a smile passed Ember's face that at least Chester was being given what he had always deserved.

Settling down in the small nest of blanket and pillow, Ember found it to be more comfortable than any of her so-called formal beds in the castle. She could stretch out or curl up and be just as content. Looking about, the little pit had vents carved in its sides. Behind them were either coals or ice and she found closing or opening them in certain patterns made for a much more pleasant temperature. She could dictate it at will.

But the loneliness...the memories.

"Ember. Can I come down?"

Looking up, she fought to give a smile when Tyr's bright eyes gazed down at her, but given the light sorrow in his look, she failed. Maybe she shouldn't have been surprised but she was. By both her lack of ability to smile and Tyr's appearance. He'd left her with Friga after the dwarrow practically threatened to drag him to his home by his braids. Did dwarves just waltz into one another's homes? Yet, her heart leapt to see a familiar face amid unfamiliar surroundings, even as comfortable as they were set up to be. Physical comfort did not equal emotional comfort.

"Sure, Tyr."

Well, at least her voice seemed to be remembering more of its purpose.

The Dwarven boy abandoned his shoes at the top and slid down, coming to a stop just above her cluster of blankets. With dwarves, according to Friga, there was usually a patch of earth to sit without disturbing the bed. But Ember was much taller and larger than a dwarf so even with the preparations Friga attempted, there wasn't exactly a lot of room. "Sorry, I..."

"No." Patting the sheets, she said, "I'd rather not be alone tonight."

He nodded, easing himself down with hesitation before plopping down solid and taking her hand. "I'm sorry all this happened. I'm sorry

we can't just rush in and make it better."

"It's okay." She exhaled deeply, forcing her throat to stay open. She didn't trust it to not slip into sand-mouth like it had earlier. *Keep those emotions tight*. "I'll be okay. I *am* okay." She added after a time, lifting her head an iota with pride.

"No, you're not." Tyr shook his head. "And lying about it won't make you okay."

"No. Honest, I'm all right." Steel mouth, tight chest. "Really."

"Honestly, child, do you think we're fools?"

The voice atop the sleeping pit had both looking up. Friga stood at the edge, dressed in her night clothes, her hair in tight sleeping braids. She didn't wait and slid down, sitting on Ember's unaccompanied side, propped up on her knees and she took the girl by the cheeks.

"I don't know what nonsense has been pounded into your head but there's nothing wrong with you because your heart hurts." Her voice was stern, solid and firm, but kind all the same. "Losing your kingdom hurts. Losing your father hurts. Losing your mother hurts."

Hurts? Hurts? *It burnt. It throbbed. It bled. But surely if she began to cry now it would never stop and then how would she look? Hardly a Princess.* Hardly someone that was going to be able to go back and save what was left. And if she couldn't make the dwarves believe it, how could she believe it herself?

Her father, her mother's cruel eyes, the last lights of her home fading into the horizon as she was thrust into a world she knew next to nothing about. Fear, loneliness, uncertainty, anger…all these things had been churning in her body for hours and now, with the night closed in, the darkness swirled them. All together they merged and the memories salted them so deeply she felt she might throw up.

She was here. Not home. Father was dead. Mother wanted her dead. The Fae had invaded and by all accounts taken her kingdom. Much as she wanted to rush back and fix it, there was nothing she could do. Not now. Not like things were. She'd sign her own death warrant, nothing more or less.

"I know it hurts."

Ember didn't answer. Her mind whirled, so many what ifs, things she should have, could have done. If she tried harder, wasn't so much of a damned fool to believe...

Friga's hands cupped her chin and she found herself drowning in the dwarrow's eyes. "You can cry, Girl."

Ember trembled, not taking her eyes off Friga's but her heart and

mind were in a flux. If she cried, if she caved, then what did that mean? How could she possibly hope to eventually take back what she'd lost if she was a wallowing pile of tears and snot?

"You ever had a hot-wound, Girl?"

The question was a surprise and a distraction, but Ember clung to it. "Where the skin turns hot and odd colors come out of it? Yeah, once or twice."

"Do you know why it does that?"

She shook her head. "Mother said it was when the Gods were angry. If you got sick, you'd failed the Gods somehow."

Friga snorted, low and fierce. "If the Gods are that petty, we're all doomed. The wounds do that because somethin' is in there that needs to get out. Maybe dirt or wood or who knows what. But the only way it gets better is to cut it and drain it."

Ember nodded. "I had that done by the Priestesses. Daddy would offer his gold for them to appeal to the Goddess of Healing. But then they'd cut it and green and white would come out and it would stop hurting."

"The heart can be hurt like that, too." Tyr offered his statement soft and calm, a whisper amid the night. "And when you keep in tears and yelling and cursing, it's like not cutting the wound."

Friga nodded. "Tyr's right. We learned here a long time ago. I'm gonna sit here and try to convince you but I will tell you this—a body that heals and a heart that heals are stronger than ones that don't."

Such a wildly different view than Daddy and yet her heart almost broke at it. No real way to describe it except it was as if her heart was screaming, crying, clawing out, trying to reach for something she couldn't see. Trying to grasp something and she had no clue what. Could she let it loose like they said? The logic of it made sense.

The idea of betraying her Father's ideals did not.

"How do I…" Her voice broke.

"Just like that." Friga took her hand and squeezed it. "Stop fighting when your voice wants to clog. Keep talkin' but let it clog and quiver."

It seemed a contradictory task, especially for someone used to proper speech and etiquette but all the same, she found some truth in what they were saying. But it wasn't a matter of simply letting loose. Maybe it was that way on the surface, but breaking years of practice in one moment was not a simple matter.

Her voice choked, her voice trembled, and she cursed. She cursed in non-discernible words. Her shoulders quaked and with a body as firm as

stone, she slumped face down into the bed, finding comfort in Friga's lap.

Yet, she could not let the tears flow loose.

The gentle touch of Friga to the back of her neck came with a gentle voice.

"Well done, sweet girl. It's a start."



Dwarven flowers.

Not the same as regular flowers, yet a beauty to them that regular flowers didn't possess. No scent, no softness.

Instead, cut and set to resemble petals, gems were positioned amid a base of silver and gold. The luminescent stone *nala* painted over them gave a living shade, light refracted from all angles.

They drifted without sound over the still lake of *Airous*—the lake of memory. There were hundreds, no, thousands of them. The lake was huge, almost as large as the mind could imagine, with different channels that went this way and that, each one coated in the rocky treasures.

One flower for each person lost before old age.

The little light visible jumped from flower to flower, leaving a shimmer of color in its wake.

Tyr had been silent since he brought Ember here, sitting by the lake's

wide shore, eyes focused on his lap. He had not tried to speak to her, nor force her to speak to him. All things considered, she was grateful for it. He'd told her briefly about the lake's significance then went quiet.

Her night had passed fretfully, with dreams dark and full of unspoken horror. Dreams were never straight forward; one would think her night would have been haunted by her father's corpse, her mother's voice and commands or even the light of the fire which had sealed her off from her previous life.

Nope. Her night had been full of running from something she couldn't place, stuck amid a group of her people and having to choose whom she could spare and being hounded for her choice, no matter what the outcome, and the night had finally ground to a halt with a sightless landscape. She'd awakened when her breathing went tight and hard.

She couldn't exactly name the rationale behind such dreams but she was wise enough to know she could blame them on the upheaval of her life. When Tyr had shown up in the morning and insisted she come with him while Friga made arrangements with the Council for whatever meeting they would insist upon, Ember had been glad for a distraction.

A new day wasn't exactly the fresh start she had hoped for. Perhaps it was her naiveté but she had hoped the morning would bring a new sense of strength to her, a feeling of confidence she'd been denied the night before.

No such miracle occurred. While sleep had done wonders for allowing her voice to return, both physically and spiritually, the sense of deep pain, suffering, and confusion had settled deep. There was no true way to describe it; it was as if the emotions had solidified and set within her stomach as a poor fruit. Her bones were weighed, dark and hard inside her skin and no amount of thinking had persuaded them otherwise.

Lapping of water on the shoreline and the soft drift of crystals on the surface was bliss. Much as she was hardly what one would call someone that sought the quiet of reflection or prayer, the atmosphere within the Lake of Memory was different. Instead of the quiet that ground the nerves and forced the mind to repeat everything one had been trying to ignore, there was a scent and feel to settle the heart.

Maybe it was the thought of spirits here. No, not spirits. That's not what Tyr had called it. Memory-doors. He'd called it that. Apparently, another dwarven belief she'd not been privy to. Memorials were more than simply places to honor the lost. They were full of emotional energy, places where those who had passed on could slip back and forth from the

world beyond and the world of the present to offer comfort to their loved ones. No physical manifestation, not like humans believed. These weren't ghosts. Not at all.

Maybe it was the many, many lost dwarves here feeling her pain and they wanted to ease it? Why they would bother with a human girl, she couldn't exactly understand but the air was full of calm, respect, and knowledge, something she couldn't define except it ran as fiercely as the blood in her veins.

"Here."

Tyr's voice drew her from contemplation back to the moment and she turned to face him, curiosity reigning free on her face. "Here, what?"

"Whatta you think?"

Resting on his palm was a small flower, formed by the cutting and placing of blue sapphires amid a green base, one of the floating bases like all the other flowers drifted upon. With rounded petals and a sampling of diamond for a center, the new flower already grasped at the soft glow in the room, dusting Ember's face in blue.

"It's beautiful." she answered with honesty, tracing the edges of the flower with her fingers, finding them lightly beveled, resulting in a soft and smooth texture. For a time, she gazed into its heart, relishing the light. "Is this why you wanted to show me this place? To add a new flower?"

"For *you* to add a new flower." He corrected her with a softness singing in his voice. "I carved this one last night in honor of your father."

Her voice went still as the waters. Looking into the gemmed flower, she lost herself in the blue. A blue she saw clearly was modeled after her father's eyes. Had she even mentioned his eyes to Tyr?

She must have. But it seemed a pretty insignificant point to remember. Yet, he had —a closer look revealed it wasn't just blue. There were slivers of green, white, and black, expertly placed to catch the right angle of light.

As she gently turned the creation to bathe in its hue, her breath came out as a flutter and all sincerity flooded her tongue. "Thank you, Tyr. Thank you."

He nodded, pulling at his braids. "Wish I could do more but…he deserved something and I bet the doors of memory work for him too. So if you wanna talk to him, you can always come here."

"Would it be okay?" Even as she asked, she placed it right on the edge of the quiet pool, letting it dance by the edge. "I mean, this is a Dwarven memorial."

"We get along pretty good with others, if given the chance." He cast his eyes out, sight flickering amongst the rainbow of shades and laughed a little bit at something she couldn't see or feel. "Besides, my great grandmother's memory-door exists here too. She'll shut up anyone that has anything nasty to say. Even Mother Stone would listen."

"If she's related to you, I'm sure she can be pretty scary."

"Hey!" Delivered with a good natured false gasp, his protest carried comfort and annoyance. "I'm not scary!"

Mind drifting to his face—his shining face—looking down at her when he'd pulled her from her mother's room flooded her memory and she brushed her fingers into the water. "No, I guess not. I don't think you could be scary if you wanted to be. I like that about you."

"Well, maybe I just need practice." Contorting his face into a fractured reflection, nose and eyes scrunched up into unnatural distortions, he slurred, slow and deep "You will not sleep…"

Snorting, Ember asked. "Is that the best threat you can do? Threaten my nights?" But her face finally brightened into a smirk.

Tyr grinned, victory molded in his eyes and face. "Got you to smile."

While her grin did fade a moment later, she couldn't deny it had felt good. For a moment, Tyr's ridiculous face was all that existed and losing herself in his eyes was a wonder. Forgetting her pain for just a heartbeat was a much needed reprieve.

Dipping her fingers back into the water, letting the gem flower linger a moment, she relished the sensation. Everything was different here, but with a slightly clearer head today, she found it wasn't all bad. She'd been more comfortable last night, physically, than any royal bed could offer. Being allowed to curl up right next to her canine friend, awakening with yelling and cursing had been met with encouragement rather than reprimand.

Utterly bizarre.

Even the water was different. Cool and sweet yet bitter all at once. She could relish the taste even when her tongue never touched it. It burned so cold and refreshing, even now, resting amid the back of her throat. Maybe a side effect of such a deep underground pool? There was almost as much moisture in the air as in the pond.

Pushing forward, her father's flower twirled and danced atop the water, sliding to join the thousands of others. She knew she'd never fail to find it, if she were to seek it out. Tyr had carved it with such precision, she was certain she could follow the refraction of the light on the water right to it.

Here you go, Daddy. At least it's a beautiful place.

It still hurt. Breathing was difficult at times when the memory of what was gone slammed into her with the force of the ocean. Waking up in a strange place had burnt the memory of home deep into her mind.

But she *was* breathing. Moving. Pressing forward. Much as just lying down and giving up was tempting, what would that accomplish? Her people would have no recourse then.

She may not have been able to help them now, but it wouldn't be like that forever.

It *couldn't* be like that forever.

She refused to believe it. Maybe she had no idea how or when she could go back. Maybe she had not even a dusting of an idea of how to deal with a Fae nor with her mother.

But she had a pulse. She was breathing. Meant she had a chance.

If she could survive, grow stronger, wiser, get a plan, get intel, then she had a chance to save them. Much as she trembled, carried a weight in her heart and a stone on her stomach, the dwarves had given her a chance. A chance they had no obligation to give.

In fact, unless the twisting in her gut was a good liar, it sounded like they had every reason *not* to help her.

"Tyr, tell me honestly: what will the Council ask me?"

The confidence fled him, resulting in a crumbled figure looking far more sheep than wolf, if a dwarf could resemble either. "Ah. The Council. They're gonna talk to you already?"

"That's what Friga said earlier. They wanna talk today. Remember? She said you could borrow me for a bit while she got ready."

"…right. Only time those old farts have rushed about anything." Standing and wiping the damp dirt from his trousers, he walked to her side and pulled her up to stand. "Just be honest with them. They can see right through lying so don't bother."

"They'll make me leave, won't they?"

Not one for untruths, Tyr shrugged. "Might try. But even the Council has heart in them. You're a good person. Kinda weird sometimes, but that's better than boring. They have to see it." He looked at her and gave a half forced smile, but it did not reach his eyes. "You're a good person, Ember. We dwarves value good hearts."

She didn't respond. She knew an unspoken warning when she heard it. Fear, raw and cold, flooded her mind. Was she to be cast out to fend for herself? Uncertainty lay on her as morning mist, coating and seeping into every pore. Bones grew heavy and the loneliness she'd endured the

night before suddenly seemed minuscule in comparison.

A tightness wrapped around her hand, caressed it, cradled it.

"But." Tyr spoke to her with a voice carrying confidence his eyes did not. Fear lingered, like a foul scent one couldn't shake. "If they don't, I'll make 'em see it." Hardening his face, he said. "And maybe you'll see me be scary after all."



MAKING first impressions was always vital, but this one carried far more weight than any she had put forth prior. The Council of the Wise made all determinations within the dwarven city and operated as their lawmakers. They controlled trade, negotiations, and even registrations of births and deaths. The responsibilities of an entire court contained within six elected people.

Swell. Court politics she was not good at under ordinary times. With her literal fate hanging over her, she remained convinced if there was a way to muck this up, she would succeed ten-fold in doing so.

"They already hate me." Voicing her concerns aloud even as she walked with Friga, Tyr by her other side, down the vast hall, toward a door made of obsidian and glass at the end of the curved corridor may not have been wise, but it was all she could do to allow herself the room to breathe. If she spoke of it, the weight lifted just enough for her to inhale and not choke on it.

"They hate everyone." Tyr remarked, even as he straightened his braids for the fifth time since beginning the short trek from the outside. "If they like you, start to look at yourself and ask questions."

"Boy, that doesn't help. And they don't hate you—or anyone else for that matter." Friga's voice was stern as ever, but even Ember could hear the trepidation in it. The older dwarrow had met her and Tyr in a tizzy, soot from the forge still on her face and decorating her front.

At least, Ember mused looking down at her own ruffled clothes, dirt and fire stains would not look out of place. Her dress was painted all sorts of shades of ash but seemed, given her and Tyr's conversation earlier, that such a thing might be in her favor.

Looks good to us, Tyr promised. *Makes it look like you work hard.*

But it's from a fire—

They don't care. Status still stands.

The doors opened as they approached and Ember jerked her head about, seeking out whatever had achieved such a feat. No one was pulling them as far as she could see and when they could peer inside the chamber, no one was tugging from the inside either.

"Pressure signal." Tyr took her by the arm. "I'll show you later."

Pressure…signal? Apparently, there was an abundance the dwarves hadn't shown her. Rather than feel angry, she pondered if her mother would have turned so readily to magic if she'd known the feats they could achieve.

"Sit."

The voice was old, older than any human voice she'd ever heard. She knew dwarves lived longer than humans, though she wasn't sure how much longer, but this voice was the crunch of dead leaves under a boot. Oddly enough though, when she sought out the voice's owner, they didn't look much older than Maur.

It was a male, dark violet, literally the same shade as all the beautiful amethysts her mother loved to deck her hair in, with the ridges and facets to match. His dark indigo beard nearly touched his knees; crisscrossed in braids which were of so many different shapes and intertwined with so many colors of bands and beads that she saw shades she didn't even know existed.

And there were five others, at least as old, if not older, sitting in a half circle. Centered in front of them was a shallow pit, maybe a foot or so deep but wide and expanded with six small bonfires lit in a horseshoe shape on the borders. Yet, there was a different shade to each fire—orange, red, yellow, blue, green, and the last one was a brilliant white. Even without getting close to it, sweat built upon her face.

Didn't know fire could burn that hot.

At the bottom of the pit, a carved design sat within the floor, a centered six pointed star made of white obsidian. Flames from the fires cast odd shadows upon it, like a prism. Flickers of light danced about the room, leaving dustings of color on the cheek and eyes.

Friga and Tyr took positions outside the pit, opposite the elders and Ember eased herself to the ground between them. Air burned hot and stinging, drawing her eyes into a squint. Her eyes watered being so close and it took a great deal of restraint to not scoot back.

Luckily, dwarves were not ones for drawing out their arguments into meaningless small talk. They got to the issue right away: no introductions, no false pleasantries. Ember trembled amid the rapid fire

words, but she was grateful for transparency.

"Tyr, son of Thoira and Loun, you admit you brought a human into our city without our permission."

"I do. I'm not ashamed of it, Elders. She means no one any harm." His voice wavered, shifting between high and low, and he kept his eyes diverted up while he lowered his head. "She's always been a friend."

"That is the decision of the Elders, not of children." The dwarf to the far left, colored teal with yellow beard and hair, spoke with a rumble to their voice and not a kind one. "You went above our authority."

"Not just him. Me, Maur, lots of other folk were agreeable to it too and they didn't push back when we came to the gates. Use your minds a bit here. The girl's kingdom was being overthrown." Friga spoke with much more confidence than Tyr had managed. "Given none of you were there, it wasn't exactly a situation where we could ask."

"And you, Friga, daughter of Gimua and Oinna—Mother Stone protect their souls—you gave your approval for this?"

"Mother Stone defend me, I did. Tyr's right. Ember's been nothin' but a friend to us."

"She is a human, nonetheless." Ember tried to mimic Tyr's posture when one of the two dwarrows—one of yellow coloring and black hair—directed their eyes to settle on her direction. While no cruelty was spilled from the lips, the scrutiny was felt. "And a human of the traitors' bloodline."

"Blood is but one ingredient in creation." Tone pinched, her teeth clenched tight, Friga commanded the room. "Or have you forgotten the integrity of the process?"

Ember knew an insult when she heard one.

The Elders stood, rose slowly, eyes narrowed, small murmured curses sparking along the room, like the popping red hot embers from the multiple fires—sharp, burning, and unrelenting.

"Mind yourself, Friga." The one who had spoken first spoke again. "We will listen if words are exchanged without toxicity."

"Then mind your own advice."

One of the others, one with the coloring of midnight and tattoos of silver, stood. "Calm. All of you." When the room settled, this dwarf looked to her. "And forgive our caustic nature." A sharp look was diverted to the other five elders and this one gave a low bow of the head to Ember. "My name is Dolan. I believe yours is Ember, is it not?"

"Dolan!" One of the others interrupted before she could reply. "She's a human. You don't have to give her anything, let alone your name!"

"I choose to do so and you should as well, if we are to have civilized conversation."

Grumbles emerged and Tyr stood himself, moving lightly in front of Ember. "She hasn't done anything to you! She's been kind to us! Stop treating her like a criminal. She hasn't done anything!"

"Maybe she has not, but her ancestors did." Tapping fingers into his beard, the Elder with coloring of yellow, both skin and hair, rose himself. "Perhaps history has failed in settling its roots in our youngests as we have feared. I'll not stand for it. Those lost amid the War of Three are not to be forgotten."

War of Three? Was that the same conflict her mother had spoken of? "I don't know what my people did to yours." She spoke cautiously, hesitantly. "But I doubt I would have been told the truth even if I asked. But I offer my sorrows for what was done."

Elder Yellow (as he did not offer his name and she had no other means to identify him) erupted amid dwarven and common, face turning a lovely orange shade. "Even now you insult us! As if offering sorrows will undo what was done! As if pretending the betrayal your people committed can be swept away."

"Mother Stone Herself, will you sit down and be silent!" Friga stepped forward. "She's trying to get answers and you aren't helping! If you're gonna hold her accountable for what her ancestors did then I have a bone to pick with you, Wali, about your great-great grandfather."

"Not comparable in the least!"

"More than comparable. If you don't wanna be held for what your grandfather did, don't hold Ember for what her ancestors did!"

"Stop!" Ember held out her hands in protest, cowering at the looks she received. "Please, tell me, what did my ancestors do that was so horrific? I can't make up for it if I don't know what it was."

Friga sent the group a look, a raise of the brow and shrug of the shoulders. "Well, answer the girl!"

Dolan nodded, raised a hand to silence the others. "Indeed. A reasonable request, Ember. Are you aware of the War of Three?"

Pondering a moment, she said. "The war where elves, humans, and dwarves were working together against a Fae invasion?"

"The same."

Nodding, she pushed her hair back behind her ears, wiping the sweat from her brow. "Yeah, but I never believed the story I was told."

"And what lies—" Purple Elder now. "—Were you told?"

Biting her lips, she held her head high regardless. "We were told the

dwarves abandoned the cause in the middle of the war. But." She raised her voice to be heard over the commotion of dwarven cacophony. "I never bought the story. It never made sense to me."

Dolan stroked his beard, running his fingers along some of his beads. "Oh? Why?"

"Didn't match with what I knew about dwarves. Too loyal. If you left in the middle of a war, it was for a reason." She looked from one face to another. "Why? What didn't I get told?"

Yellow Elder scowled, obviously still not convinced of anything except anger. "Your people slaughtered our children. Hundreds of them. Children you promised to help us protect."

Ember's heart sank. "Children?"

"Children." Yellow Elder pointed at Dolan. "I will not stand here and let you allow in a human murderer. She is not dwarven. By our law, she must be cast out! If we had colder hearts, we would buy back our vengeance with blood. But I insist—cast her out before any more of our children are lost because of our "good hearts." No more deaths!"

Murmurs began slow then gradually rose. Dolan, despite not having a change in expression, was looking from one to the other, looking for allies, for reason, and finding very little of it. "She has committed no crime." Desperation cloaked his words.

"She's human." Teal Elder. "Reason enough. We made the mistake of trusting them once!"

Friga stood, reached into her bag and lifted a tiny wooden bead, decorated with a blue gem, maybe a type of garnet? Wasn't sapphire. No real decoration to it beyond that. Her voice rang through the chamber with enough intensity to silence a war. "*Morine*!" She proclaimed the dwarven word with such fervor Ember would not have been surprised if her throat tore.

Silence, with only the crackling of fire to penetrate the room. The six piles of flame wavered, as if stunned into submission themselves.

"*Morine*." She said again and then reached out, taking hold of a thin strand of Ember's hair. "*Morine*." She twisted it, not a full braid but a simple twist and threaded the end through the bead, tying it firm before taking a duplicate bead from her bag and threading her own hair in a similar manner. "*Morine*!" Firm, solid as the stone beneath their feet, she stood in front of Ember entirely, a living shield between her and the fires. "*Morine, morine*!"

With the sixth declaration, babbling gradually arose from the group, one by one amid Dolan's smile. Even the Teal Elder and Purple Elder had

fallen silent amid the declaration and indeed were gathering themselves to stand and retreat, as if that were the final word.

Because, evidently, it was.

"I do believe, unless I am mistaken, this seals young Ember's place with us." Before another could voice protest, Dolan walked around the pit and took Ember's hand within his. "Welcome, Child."

One by one, the others walked around the fires and did the same, taking her hand briefly and saying, "Welcome."

"Elder Dolan." Yellow Elder reframed, standing just out of arms' length. "I must protest. This is unorthodox and—"

"Do you challenge Mother Stone Herself on the matter?" Friga trotted to stand before him and pushed her finger into his chest. "Do you proclaim She does not hold *Morine* as sacred and true?"

"I…would never declare—"

"You sure sound like you are." Tyr snorted and rubbed his two thumbs together three times, despite the look of displeasure from Friga for the gesture. "So, are you or not?"

With reluctance coloring all his muscles, the dwarf relented. "I will not challenge the prospect of *Morine*. I will state I disapprove, but I will issue no challenge." He turned away from Ember, would not hold her in his sight. But he did step forward and extend a hand to brush her palm ever so slightly. "Her place is sealed. Welcome."

"Good." Friga lifted Ember to her feet and clasped her around the elbow. "Then we're done here."



"FRIGA?"

The older dwarven woman turned from her spot at the small forge. After such an outburst, she had all but bustled Ember back to her home, telling Tyr to inform his family of the declaration and send word to the craftsmen that would be willing to trade for what Ember was in need of. The two of them had returned to her little cavern home alone and Friga went right to her personal forge in the back.

Apparently, almost every dwarf home had a forge. Not as impressive as the communal ones which were larger with much more capacity, but small enough for crafts and works within a family. As soon as they got

back, Friga all but leapt into the forge.

Turning at the call of her name, Friga waved the girl close. "Ah, you're welcome here, too, Girl. Just mind the fire."

"Friga, what did you say in the meeting? What is this?" Lifting the tiny bead in her hair, she traced the blue. "This is what you were making this morning, weren't you?"

"Aye, it was." Placing a piece of metal into the flame, she stepped away, setting her tongs down. "*Morine* is a verb. It means to take into home. With us dwarves, anyone you agree to take into your home for an extended period becomes family. And while those ol' *duerrs* might have old prejudices, Mother Stone is quite clear on the prospect of *Morine*—*morine* is protection. As long as I am welcome here, so are you."

Staring at the tiny bead, Ember swallowed, catching the lump in her throat. "You did that for me?"

"Aye. And I'll keep doing it until you no longer want it."

"Why did you…?"

"Because I've grown rather fond of you, my Girl." Friga approached, extended her hand, and gave a light squeeze to Ember's lower arm. "One element that always holds weight for us is loyalty. Worth all the gems in the earth that is. So, know by that bead you have mine."

Tracing the beautiful trinket, allowing it to settle amid her black hair, Ember asked. "You humble me. I don't know if I'm worthy of it."

"Bah." Shaking her head, Friga corrected. "I give my loyalty to people that I desire to. If you haven't earned it by being yourself, nothing you do additional will earn it. You're Ember. That's enough."

Ember stumbled, mentally, her mind throwing her through so many flips that a mere squeak escaped her lips in answer. Loyalty, while something she certainly prided herself on, was not a factor introduced nor supported in court life. One of her biggest problems with it actually. But to hear someone else—someone she considered wise and well experienced—express it so readily and naturally, as if it were a simple as breathing…well, what did one do with such information?

"Don't overthink things right now." Whipping her forehead on her sleeve, Friga turned back to the flaming forge. "I know you want to go back."

She nodded. "I do. But…I have no idea how."

"Can't say I do either. But we'll work on that. We'll find some answers. But until we do, you don't gotta worry about a roof over your head or food in your belly." There was a seriousness to the dwarrow's eyes. "I wouldn't dream of tryin' to take the place of your Daddy. But

I'm not gonna let nothin' happen to you either."

What could she say to that? Family and home meant so much to dwarves and here was Friga, proclaiming a sacred act, just to keep her safe. There was a deep difference in that and in the kind of protection the knights had given her. Friga had no obligation and yet she was offering it anyway.

Well, if she was going to do that then the least she could do was to find a way to contribute. To learn. To grow. If she was going to win back her kingdom, she had to become better than she was. And if she was to show her true gratitude, she couldn't just remain a pampered princess. How many stories were ended by a princess? No, they were won by fighters. By underdogs. By people unafraid to be more than they were.

"Guess I need to make myself useful." Tying her long sleeves back, Ember lifted her head, pushing that fear and uncertainty down. "As long as I'm here."

"Child. Your worth is not measured by your labor. You hold worth because you are you."

Do I? How could that be the truth? A mother didn't turn on their own child without reason, did she?

A warm hand slapped hers gently, drawing her back to the moment. Ember looked down, finding an odd warmth amid Friga and it was not drawn from the fire.

"I know you're feelin' lost. I can't say I have an answer. But I do know—don't go on some fruitless quest to 'find yourself.' Do something else, something not dependent on anything else. Create you."

Fruitless? How could that be a meaningless quest? She was once Ember, the princess of her Kingdom and striving to be the daughter and future Queen her mother so desired. She had been the girl wanting to prove herself to her father. She had been the naïve fool that let her entire kingdom be taken from her.

She had to find herself, now more than ever.

But, perhaps she could find it by way of living? At least, somewhat.

Was it okay to lose herself in the now, in the moment, and try to let the fears of yesterday fade?

Watching the metal hum to bright red, she recalled Tyr's remarks on the ability to create. On her interest, on her fascination. On the raw power it took to swing a hammer and the raw imagination it took to form a craft.

Well, Friga *said* to create, did she not?

Stepping a little closer, Ember asked.

“Friga. Let me try. Please?”

She didn’t know what she was expecting, but it wasn’t what she got.

Without hesitation, Friga passed the tongs to the princess with the warning. “It’s still hot, even when it stops glowing. Don’t burn yourself by forgetting it.”

No delay, no wince, no remark about how she might cause utter chaos with her lack of knowledge or faulty step.

Again, so utterly odd and yet, refreshing all in the same motion.

“Right.” She shifted the tongs, grasping the small bit of metal, watching as the grey color warmed, the color of sunset gradually bleeding out of it. “That hot enough?”

“Give it a good beat with the hammer. You’ll find out easy enough.”

Ember stepped back, pulling the red hot metal to rest on the anvil before taking a good smack at it.

Her arm echoed with pain for a good minute and she averted her ire to the dwarven woman. Irritation bled from her eyes. “Would it have killed you to say it’s not hot enough yet?’

Friga laughed. “No, but it would have taught you nothing. We become wise by being allowed to be idiots.

“Oh, now I’m an idiot.” But she smiled. A genuine one.

“Less of one than you were five minutes ago.” Friga took the tongs back, settling the metal back in the forge. “You’ve the desire to learn and that’s no small factor. But your patience needs much tempering yet.” She reached up, brushing some ash to the girl’s nose. “But you’ll get there. If you want to learn, I want to teach. Can’t say I’m a nice teacher but you’ll learn, I guarantee.”

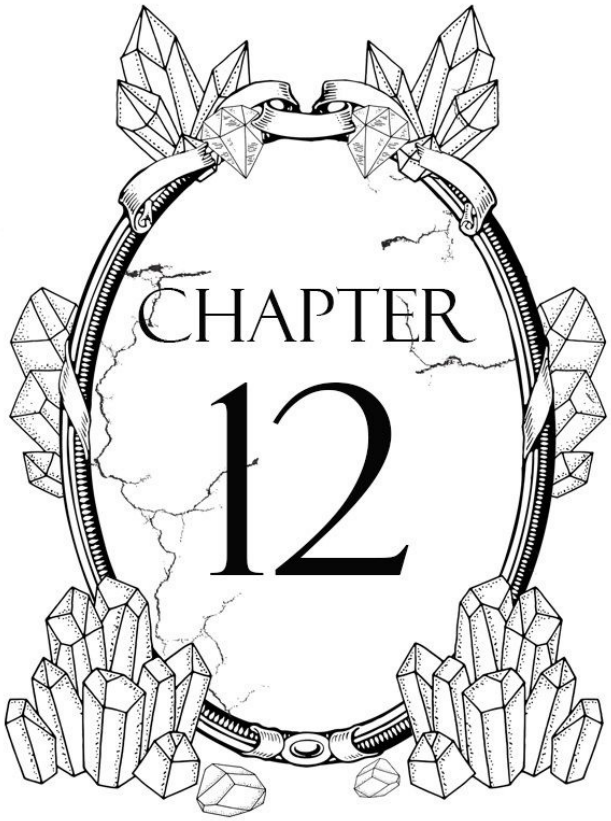
Ember eyed the forge, watched, waited until the metal went from sunset to white. Grasping it again, she wrestled it out, taking up a hammer. It seemed unreal to her. Her kingdom gone, her mother a traitor, her father dead and her people at a loss.

But if she were to go back now, she’d die. Then they would die.

What was she going to do? What could she do? What could she learn? What could she do? Could she even really learn anything? If her past was any indication…

“Girl. Focus.”

When Ember brought down the hammer that time, the metal bent.


CHAPTER
12

FIVE YEARS LATER

"Even the rain's dirty."

Ember nodded to Tyr and gave a low oomph when Kva leaned on her back, her wet hair draping into her face. As if Tyr would let her go on this adventure alone. He hadn't missed an outing since they began doing these routinely five years ago. No matter how many times they were chased back with new cuts and bruises, if she was headed out, he was coming.

Kva began to tag along about a year ago.

Ember was grateful for it, as much as she couldn't imagine not doing this, even worse was imagining doing it alone.

Ironed against the ground, intimate with the earth, normally allowed the tall grasses to hide them. The paths toward the palace resembled more forgotten thorn monsters than a clear journey forward. Even the trees held a low off-white shade, the dusted and dry color of old bones.

Ember traveled it so often in the past few years. Each time, it became more decrepit, more broken, more lost. Tyr was her stone, her guiding light that kept her from being swept away amid the living death permeating everything.

As for the rain, Ember looked skyward and frowned, holding an open palm out, catching the drops as they fell. Lifting her fingers to her nose, she inhaled, coughing lightly at the foul scent. "No argument there, Kva. It smells like rotten wood."

Last week, it had carried some semblance of life.

No more. Even the air and water was dying.

Kva pushed her braids back and held a hand out to the human woman. "Got a tie?"

Patting her pockets and digging into her belt came up empty so Ember reached up into her hair, pulling loose the tan one and handing it over. "Here."

"Thanks." Kva used it around her cluster of braids and gave a wince as she pulled it tight. Tyr snorted her direction.

"You didn't bring spares with you?"

"Don't think about pulling my hair back when we're above ground."

"We've done this how many times? Ten? Fifteen in just the last three months? You'd think it'd be common sense by now. You can't keep your braids tamed with an army to help—"

"Shh!" Ember shushed them both and slowly moved to sit up, as her

dwarven companions remained low. After a moment, no sound echoed amid the land and Ember stood. Stiff as an oak and just as unmovable, she waited, the whistling wind interrupting the cold silence.

"Is it safe to say it's too quiet and too still?"

Kva looked up and after a moment sat up herself with Tyr already on his feet and at Ember's side. That was no surprise. The two of them had been inseparable since Ember became one of their society and with the addition of the courtship braid in Ember's hair a year ago, it was more likely to find them together than apart.

Dwarvish courtship and relationships were much more complicated than it appeared at first glance. Braids and beads conveyed most of it—there was the Interest braid which she had taken on two years ago when they were exploring if there was something beyond friendship. So reluctant she'd been at first—after all, a dwarf and a human? Was there even a shadow of a chance for that? Yet, after taking the silver cuff to her hair, it became as much a part of her as scalp and skin.

They'd grown from there.

The Exploration braid came a year later when they'd gone from interest to actively pursuing a relationship. Not a permanent commitment but one created to explore and test if they were the proper reflections of one another.

Now, she had the Courtship braid, reflecting their active pursuit towards permanent companionship. If they continued down this path then the Promise braids and eventual Love braids would come, equivalents to engagement and marriage in human culture. Ember honestly didn't know what would come next, but not taking the next braid didn't seem right and being without one would feel wrong as well.

Thus, they had been in the courtship phase for the last two seasons.

Venturing back toward her old home had become common practice for the three of them. It had begun with just Ember but when she came back barely alive, Tyr turned into her constant companion. They've half-fallen back into the dwarven city more times than she could count and Friga had lost a good twenty-five years—so she said—from the stress. Fingering the scar on her arm when her last attempt had ended with her nearly losing the limb, Ember took a steadying breath. Each trip back meant more information. More information meant she drew ever closer to liberating her people.

And maybe her mother too. Because how could anyone look at the world that died around them and be doing it willingly? Surely, this could not have been what she had imagined when she made that alliance? It

couldn't be.

Ember knew the way by heart. When she had almost died on an attempt a year ago, courtesy of an alien force that she could only describe as magic, Tyr's knowledge of the underground escape hatches had been vital. Even then, she barely remembered making her way downward. Friga's signature gravelly voice had told her she'd somehow made it back to the city. Ember had been unable to rise for three days.

Friga never left her side, rewrapping and tending the burns on her arms, never without a scold over her foolishness but never without a soft smile and gentle story on her lips to remove the pain.

Yet, Friga never tried to stop her. Cautioned. Gave advice. Sent three of the guards after her to wait at the river entrance but she did not try to stop her.

Remember to run when you must, Girl.

Ember never lost track of those escape hatches anymore.

Time made one wiser.

"It is." Too still and too quiet was right. Kva was hardly one to be a stranger to noise but she knew the benefits of silence and focus; she'd been a good friend to learn the ways of Dwarven kind, outside of Tyr and Friga's circle. Yet, her assessment was on point.

No birds. No animals. No wind. Nothing.

Ember narrowed her eyes, shielding against the sunlight, hiding behind the storm clouds. It was the worst kind of sun—one with the intensity and blindness but none of the warmth—tucked behind the cold rain. "Even worse than last time. Look at the roads—no one's been down them in a while."

"Thought there was still trade and negotiations. Didn't we catch the trail end of one a few months ago?" Tyr huffed in the cold, shaking his head loose of wet drops.

"We weren't sure," Kva clarified. "Looked like one but it could have been anything. Lots of reasons people might be in the wilderness besides wanting to travel and talk to a Queen."

"Except how many times have we seen that?" Tyr leaned to Ember's side. "Not one person in over two years."

"Not just out here. I never see the people outside their homes, outside of the palace." Ignoring the shouts of about *how could you have gone alone that close*, Ember took a slow step forward, slipping into the outstretched shadows of the dying trees. Naked and limp, they hardly provided much cover but the lingering dark beneath them could trick the eye long enough for escape. She'd discovered it, quite by accident, in their third

excursion. “They used to come out here a lot, seeking woods or rock or —”

“Well.” Tyr cast an arm about as he jogged to catch up with her. He dropped any mention of the danger she had put herself in and for that, she was grateful. “Think it might be because there’s nothin’ for them to seek anymore?”

Ember frowned and knelt, pushing her fingers into the ground. The soil tumbled around her fingers, caked into small lumps flaking into the wind. “Probably. But something else. There’s something else.” That flash of color and the pain it brought when she’d woken up back with Friga with no memory was not natural. Not fire, not lightning. Something else. Something otherworldly.

Fae. Of that, she was positive.

Finding it was another matter. Seeping her fingers into the earth, letting it roll over her skin, she focused. Looking up to Tyr, she said. “You’re better than I am. The Stone still doesn’t talk to me.” Her voice weighed heavy, disappointment coloring each vowel.

“’Cause she’s stubborn. Maybe She thinks you’re a threat to Her title.” Tyr slipped his fingers into the earth, pulling up large clumps of dirt and loose granite before his fingers clasped at the bedrock. Closing his eyes, he focused, pressed, and pleaded.

After a time, he opened his eyes and let out an exasperated sigh. “Nothin’. She isn’t talking to me either.”

Horrible of her to think, but his failure soothed her own.

Slipping forward towards one of the gatherings of three or four trees, Kva waved her friends forward. “Think if we get a little closer?” Wrinkling her face into a scowl, the dwarrow set her eyes directly on Ember. “Since someone has already gotten close enough to nearly kill herself.”

The two followed her, Ember clutching her cloak inward and tighter around her shoulders. As the water piled into grey puddles, even those reflections grew distorted and dark amid the air, hiding any light behind heavy mist. Her leather boots slipped over the muddy ground, and Ember twisted her ankles to gain more traction.

A mere two years earlier and the same trek would have involved darting to bushes and ditches, hushing one another about their clumsy feet and waiting for the cover of twilight. The pathway now was overgrown with twig and thorn as the trees grew scrawnier with each step. Ember remembered well enough the loudness of the birds that used to call through the branches or the gentle rustle within the stream of

frantic fish, trying to escape the fisherman's hook.

Silence greeted her ears. Not even the murmur of a crow or raven. Looking to her left, the stream, once full of fish and color, sat dried and muddied. Shriveled. Little plant life remained, save a conglomeration of thorns, prickers and dead leaves.

Each time they ventured back, the landscape grew worse. Sticking to the outermost lands had been safest, with no idea of how much power or command the Fae still rendered or if Ember was still considered a prize to be sought.

Given the narrow escapes she'd found herself in and the odd manner in which the attacks came, it seemed plausible if not certain.

"Ember?"

Tyr's voice cut into her dank thoughts and she looked at him, taking comfort in the familiar face. His braids jingled as he walked and she took great pride in the one she had given him for courtship. He had placed it directly in front, caressing his cheek. While she had gained a lot of stride in metal work, rounded beads were hardly her forte yet Tyr had not hesitated to slip the off center blue bead onto his braid with a cry and shout of joy.

He leaned close. "Are you doing okay?"

"I have to be," came her usual response.

"But I didn't ask that. I asked if you were."

She turned, met his eyes with her own, looking down as he stood as tall as he could. His eyes were some type of lethal weapon, able to push through any of her lies in an instant. Friga had similar power over her, derived from five years of influence.

"I'm never gonna be okay with this Tyr because every time we come, we just leave with more questions. I need to know what's going on, how dangerous things have gotten. It's getting worse but I need to know how bad it is." Looking at her hands, she wrung them tight. "Because I have to be able to do something about it and how am I gonna do it if I don't even know what I have to deal with and then—then—"

Nodding with the assurance of a promise, Tyr took hold of her wrist and they strode forward again, leaving the safety of the mountain range behind them and drifting further and further away from the escape hatches built into the bedrock.

The deliberate withdraw from the escape routes told its own story. "Then we won't leave until we get answers."

"You always say that," Kva's voice carried little venom but Tyr greeted her like it had.

"Not this time—"

Ember pushed ahead of them, Tyr clung close to her side as they twisted their way around a path leading into the small glen between the outer limits and the palace grounds' borders.

Living death greeted them.

There were no stumps where trees had been cut down or blackened remains of lightning strikes. Instead, the trees still stood but they were shrunken. Small and skinny, with bare trunks on a majority of them. Ember reached a hand out to touch one of the few still clinging to some bark and it came off in her hand, dust and splinters in a moment. The few scraps settled in her palm crumbled with the closure of the fist.

"Dead. It's all dead." Upping her pace, they cleared the small forgotten cluster of trees and emerged onto the wide plain curling upward toward the palace.

Ember stiffened, went cold, and covered her mouth.

Tyr wrapped his arm around her waist, tight and firm.

Kva cursed. "Mother Stone preserve us."

The fields were barren, mere toothpicks of wood and stalk where once vibrant layers of yellow and brown once stood. Where the crops had swayed in the breeze with a golden shimmer there was now packed dirt and leaves rotten with age. Every so often, the bleached white of bones would appear, a bleak contrast to black and brown.

Not even two months prior, they had seen patches of flowers—small but thriving. There had been small trails of animals. Hidden from view, yes, but still living.

This. Nothing was alive here.

In the distance, there was a faint circle about the palace of greenery. Towers still loomed over the landscape but the once vibrant white had dulled to slate and black, as if the Gods had painted permanent shadows upon the stone.

Slow at first then with a quickening pace, Ember made her way down, slipping off the main road and into the forgotten grounds. Burnt husks of old homes stood empty and bare, an occasional whisper of broken hinge giving away what once had been.

The decay was accelerating.

The walk was done in silence until they found the first one.

Half withered with the elements, flesh still grey but patched with frost and sun charred all at once, the figure was no mere animal but a man. Putrid and sharp, rotting flesh invaded the nostrils and it took all Ember's resistance to not throw up. It wasn't that she'd never been

exposed to death—she routinely helped with the processing of meat with Fundan and clearing out the deceased animals when time played its game.

This was different. She knew this man. She knew him as the kind hearted soul always offering water and a fun tale. The marks on the skin gave it away. Small scars from laboring in fields for far too long.

She could still hear his laugh.

A guffaw eternally silenced.

At closer glance, a crossbow bolt protruded from his back. Her fingers caressed the light green dyed feathers. The feathers offered to official fighters. A knight's possession. This wasn't a stray shot. Too precise. She doubted the man would have had time to cry out.

"Shot. He was shot by a knight."

"Aren't knights supposed to protect?" Kva looked around the landscape but nothing else was even close. The sole sign anyone had even observed the body where it fell was a bruise on the side—from a kick of a boot.

The man had been shot trying to flee the kingdom and had been left where he lay.

Sinking to her knees, Ember laid her hand on the man, quivering at the hardness and cold. He could not have been here for long; she would have noticed on her last excursion. But his body was withered, as if left to the elements for years—

"Tim?" She didn't recognize her voice. It hung heavy in the air as her eyes scanned for any sign she was mistaken. Any inkling it was another man lying dead—but would that really be any better?

She knew her people and she knew the man before her was old Farmer Timothy.

"The old man?" Tyr asked, kneeling to the ground next to her. "The farmer?"

"Yes." Voice caught, Ember rubbed her face. No tears came to her eyes. While she had come close many a time and she had grown in her ability to allow others to see vulnerability, tears had yet to come. Her throat filled with them, but they did not come from the eyes. "It's Tim. And if he's here…what about Helen? Their kid? What's been happening that he would leave without his family? What aren't we seeing?"

Anger, sadness, helplessness, it all boiled over and she turned and swung her fist into the ground, where it vibrated up her arm as the bits of stone under her blow gave way. Working among dwarves for the past five years had built muscle upon her bones and with emotion serving as

a painkiller, the bits of rock dug into her flesh meant little.

"They're dying! Everything's dying! The air itself is dying!"

Her people. Tim. Helen. What about Emery? The older woman, broken already, what with her lost child to a Fae and now she was under the heel of one! Was she even alive anymore or had despair claimed her? The blacksmith Yalin? The priests Jenna and Rachelle? Henriette? Fran? The children…how old would they be now? If they were even still alive? How could anything be alive with death embodied everywhere?

Unnatural, all of this. The land wasn't just dying. The people weren't just starving. The essence of life—the indescribable feeling embodied in a place creating its own uniqueness—was being sucked away.

Strong arms wrapped around her from behind and pulled her tight. Sinking against Tyr's scent, she let her breath seep out in, replacing it with the sharp smell of coal, lake water and smoke making Tyr *Tyr*. Root. Yes, root. Like Friga had taught her so many years ago. Root. Here and now. Kva and Tyr. Alive and breathing.

"With me?"

Nodding, Ember pushed his arm off, "With you." Bowing her head, she covered her eyes. "Forgive me Tim. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I—"

"Shut up." Kva's tone was harsh, but not unkind. "Listen!"

Faint at first but growing louder, Ember recognized the thump, thump thump of hoof beats. Kva and Tyr immediately glanced about, looking for any potential hiding spots. Despite the overall dead nature of the place, there was enough leaf mould to cover something small.

Two dwarves would be a stretch, but with no other option, Tyr and Kva made for it, casting the mud and leaves up and sinking as deep into the earth as they could. Tyr found himself the most exposed, given his bright white skin yet he reached for Ember. "Ember! Hide."

If only one of them could fit in here, let it be her and he'd expose himself to whatever came.

Shaking her head, Ember withdrew from his grip. "Not enough space for all of us!" Voice sharp and low, she looked around, her ears echoing with the hoof beats. Closer they came, the shorter her time grew. Much as she was able to swing a weapon now, against an armored knight and probably one clothed in a spell, she wasn't foolish enough to think herself as a match.

Thump, clop. Thump, clop.

Voices.

"Ember!" Kva snarled. "Run, idiot! If you can't hide, run! Head back home!"

She stayed where she was.

Run. Hide.

Leave Tyr and Kva? No, no.

Hide? But hide where? And would it even accomplish anything?

Wait, but staying out in the open wasn't an option either—

"Ember!" Whispered and sharp, Tyr pushed a puff of dust at her. "Go!"

She fell to the ground and after a moment's delay, she moved, slipping by the cold body of Tim, curling herself half underneath him. Tim, even in death, was longer and larger than she was. The bloating of decay cast a water weight to him, the bugs and maggots shifted, a large one sliding down her cheek as her face settled beneath the rotting flesh. Squeezing her eyes shut, she whimpered, "Sorry, sorry. I'm so sorry Tim!" As she shifted, one of her nails cut into the hardened flesh, just enough to allow gasses and liquids to release, one putrid stream at a time.

The smell. She would not forget the scent until her dying day and by all the Gods and Mother Stone herself, the intensity burned into her nostrils. The urge to vomit was intense and if her adrenaline had not shut down everything non-essential, she had no doubt she would have. Liquid, sticky and warm, oozed over her arm and crawling ants followed it when they pressed into the earth, tiny bites leaving tiny dots on her skin. Worst of all, while the eyes had been lost long ago to birds, she still gazed into skull bone and the memory of what should have been there—that alone haunted her.

The hoof beats continued, without too much of a pause. Occasionally, they would slow. For a moment, she waited for them to stop, then held her breath to see if they did. If they did, something was amiss. They had no reason to stop in an empty field until they spied her or the others. She considered closing her eyes—a childish reaction—but forced her sight to watch the road, what little she could see.

"No intruders have come this way for years. I say burn all of it and be done with it."

"The Queen has her reasoning. Unless you wish to tell her that her logic is flawed?"

Those voices. Ember knew one, distinctly and the other was faintly familiar, as if the afterthought of a dream.

"No one's that stupid. Still seems like a waste of resources to me." A snort. "And what was so important to make us come out here in the rain?"

"It's never enough for her. She's getting more paranoid by the day."

"Don't see why. Lady Alyssum has already given her miracles."

"Not enough. Youth, beauty, it's never enough. She's starting to plate the castle inside with flattened gold. You tell me what's next." He threw a stone haphazardly into the fields.

A rock hit the Tim's flesh and bounced off. Pillows of gas erupted from the tiny openings in the skin and Ember bit and nearly choked on her tongue to keep silent. The maggots and other creepy crawlers scrambled.

"Talking with the Queen is always risky. Bring her enough gifts and do as you're told will win you favors to last a while. She's got a goal, she says and when that's finally done, she'll be more sociable. When she has what she's owed. Can afford to be nicer then, I guess."

"Can't come soon enough."

Their voices were drifting. They were slipping further away.

"Lady Alyssum has been fulfilling her promises thus far. Whatever the Queen wants shouldn't be too hard to achieve. Maybe we ought to mention to her the ridiculousness of keeping this area. Less to weigh on the Queen's mind. Lose many more peasants and we'll run out of scapegoats when the Queen enters a mood."

"Don't understand it. Not a pleasant thing, their lives but they aren't going to find better. Where would they run to? Gralcimm is an ally. Would turn them away in a moment. Too far to go anywhere else."

"Thinking isn't their strong point. Little bit of struggle and they blame everyone but themselves." A laugh. "If they bothered to make themselves useful and unique, they might rise in worth."

A light chuckle but Ember knew that kind of laugh. It was a hesitant laugh, the kind that made one consider if it was safer to laugh or scream. The light hesitation strung through the vocals felt familiar. She'd heard it before, when this entire nightmare started. Uncertainty painted with inability.

As the sounds vanished with the pounding rain, she lay still.

"Em?" The body shifted and twisted as the sky came more into view and Kva and Tyr's faces came into view. "Are you okay?"

Ignoring Kva's inquiry, she sat up, brushing off her face and chest of the loose worms and maggots. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" Tyr settled next to her. "Their talk?"

"Not the talk. The hesitation. The way they laughed." Standing, she looked at the sky as the rain became more prevalent, pounding the ground with its droplets. Each one a knife blow to her skin. "Fae magic's

still working."

"How can you tell?" Kva wrung out her braids as the rain added more weight to them.

"I've heard it once. Can't forget it. And the feeling…like when I came alone and was knocked out. When you two had to drag me back from that…thing that attacked me. Maybe I don't remember seeing much but I know what it *felt* like." Looking down at the body at her feet, her voice cracked, choked. "Tim, I'm so sorry."

An arm threaded around her waist. "Ember." Tyr's voice was steady and firm, even as he turned his face away from the remains of the man he used to listen to on the regular. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Doing something stupid would be better than doing nothing!" Voice caustic and acidic, she turned to him, eyes alive with pleas. "Trying to sneak in isn't working and they're running out of time! It reeks of death here! I can't fail at this anymore!"

"Didn't Friga say she would try and find a way for us to combat the Fae when you first came? Or somethin' like that?" Kva took hold of Ember's other arm, pulling her close as if she was going to take off at a run for revenge at any moment. Given the look in her eyes, Kva wasn't so sure she wouldn't.

Tyr answered. "She did. But finding anyone willing to talk about Fae knowing anything worth your time is hard. Ember, maybe it's time we demanded answers instead of doing this on our own?"

"Demand?" His option seemed to pierce her inner war. "Demand from what?"

"From anyone that'll listen." Looking about, Tyr heaved a sigh, one born of pity and frustration. "But you're right. This is just getting worse and worse and worse. The rock's crying."

Kva nodded. "This poison goes deep."

"And now they're trying to keep people in—why? Nothing's gained for them to keep dying people in. So, why kill anyone trying to leave? Wouldn't less people be less of a hassle? Kinda surprised your mother didn't go on a genocide as soon as she could."

"Has to have something to do with the magic." Ember looked down at Tim, closed her eyes. "Fae magic we know nothing about."

"So, let's go change it. Let's not take a 'we can't discuss that' or 'we can't say' for an answer anymore. Politics be damned."

Ember looked to him. "You'd help me?"

"Been sticking with you so far, haven't I?" He fingered his braid, caressing her crudely made bead. "If it's important to you, it's important

to me. Pretty clear the alternatives aren't working." He took her hand and let his braids brush the top. "And I won't let this torture you anymore, my Sapphire. We need to end this."

Yes. Yes, end it. End all of it. For good or ill. One way or another. This had to end. Her mother hadn't stopped and if what she overheard was true, she wouldn't give up. It wasn't a case of hoping and wishing. There needed to be action.

Drenched, she turned and eyed the corpse who served as her sanctuary. "We bury him first. From flesh to ash so the Goddess of Death will take him."

Throwing her arms up, Kva accused, voice vibrating despite her attempts to keep it down. "Really? Will you make up your mind which you want to do? We barely keep from getting caught and now you wanna light a pyre?!"

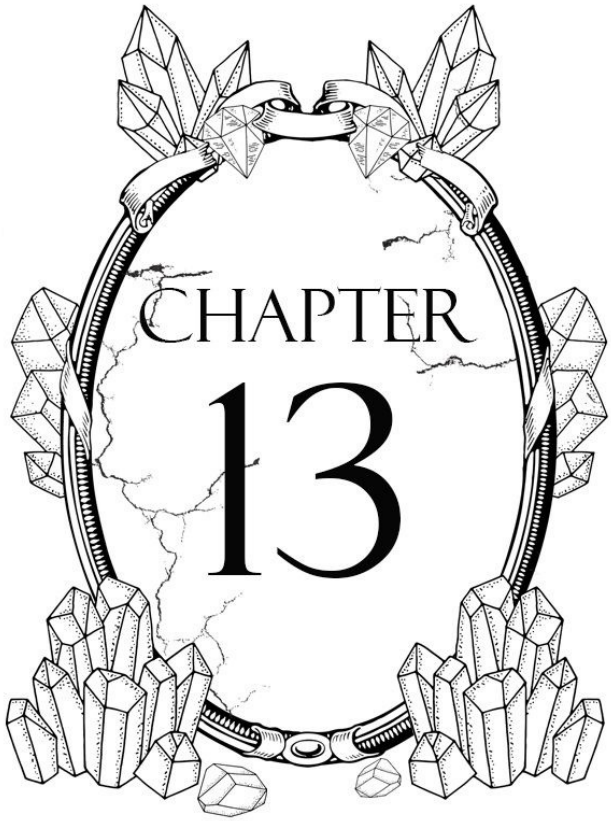
Tyr looked at Ember. Hard to tell from the rain but he saw wetness in her eyes. It could have been from the drops currently turning everything to mulch and mud but something told him otherwise.

But the tears didn't escape.

The way she looked at the old man, her heart flooding from her face, drowning the air in regret, sadness, and determination.

She was still a Princess for her people.

"I'll find something dry."



"I have to do something. I've done nothing for too long!"

"Wouldn't call it nothing, Black Star." Friga adjusted her position and took out her comb. "I'd say you've done plenty."

It was a common state for the two of them. Friga sitting on the edge of the sleeping pit and Ember settled a few inches below as the dwarrow tended to the young woman's long, black hair. It had been long when she arrived, and after five years among a race that treasured and tended to hair, it now would tumble nearly to her feet if left loose and unattended. Hence, she had adopted the dwarven style of multiple and intersecting braids both as an acceptance and as a necessity. Taking them out at the end of the day and having Friga comb through them until it fell smooth and crisp had become a soothing ritual, even if she came today with it soaked in rainwater and wind-swept.

Well accustomed to a wide number of objects amid those tresses, Friga pulled the wet leaves and twigs loose and tossed them aside, taking the comb to the twisted strands a moment after, pausing every so often to dislodge a newly located foreign piece. “Nothin’ would mean you hadn’t grown at all. Can’t say I agree. Plus, I’d say all those scars are proof enough you haven’t done nothin’.”

“Failures.” Ember rubbed her wrist; eyes trailing over the healed burns, the cuts, and the flesh still carrying a dusting of bruises. All obtained by going back and yet having to flee. So much attempted and yet none accomplished. “I’ve grown taller…and wider.” Tapping her broader shoulders, built from lifting and mining and crafting, Ember tilted her head to the left then the right but ceased her movement with the tap to her neck.

Friga’s strong hands dug into the muscles about her chin and shoulders. Anxiety hid in the muscles but Friga always managed to chase it out. Seemed almost wrong to let her this time. What right did she have for relaxation when Tim and who knew how many others were dead? “But I’m still here and what’s left of my people is there. And what’s left of them is rapidly dwindling.” *Tim. Emery. And what of the knights? Jacob? Henriette?*

Leaning to loom over her back, Friga’s braids draped near Ember’s face. Taking the hint without a word, Ember laid her cheek against them, taking comfort in the gesture. A light tingle warmed her cheeks, after all dwarven hairs contained the same sensory abilities as the skin. She might not be able to return it, but she would certainly take it. A light dusting of warmth to the soul helped settle her.

“Black Star.” Tapping the neck, the dwarrow sat back after a minute. “You woulda died if you went back before.”

“And it’s the same now!” Grinding her teeth and pulling her fingers into tight fists, Ember looked up, gazing at the dwarrow who had tended after her these past five years. “Nothing’s changed, Friga! Not for the better, anyway. I stay safe and my people die.” Gazing at her feet, she leaned into the gentle caress on her scalp. “I have to do something. Something that matters. I have to. I probably already took too long.”

“’Member what I tol’ you, ‘bout being careful and thinkin’ with your head and not your heart?”

Exasperated, Ember remarked in Dwarven. “*Junish, junish.*” With a light jostle of her head, she settled. “You practically beat that into my head.”

“Sometimes you have to beat hard with a hard head.” No malice

lingered in her voice. “Tell me, what good will it do you if you die? Who will help your people then?”

“Who’s helping them now?!” Pushing her way to her feet, she turned, her leather breeches still clinging to her skin with the rainwater and long hair whipping about like a dark shadow. “They’re dying, Friga and all I’ve done is hide! And you *let* me hide instead of calling me out for being the coward I am!”

“You’ve grown up.” The dwarrow stood, wrapping her hands into her dress, rubbing away the stray moisture. “Somethin’ to be said for that. You’ve grown in skill, though you refuse to see it. You’re alive. You’re a lot wiser than you were five years ago.”

“Maybe being wise isn’t the best thing.” Huffing, Ember folded her arms. “If being wise means my people die, I’d rather be stupid.”

“Now, do you really believe that or are you being stubborn?”

“No!” Turning as she spoke, she paced the whole of the small cavern. It was rather like she had been when she first arrived—frantic, babbling, tripping over her words. Key difference was now she had grown. Working amid the forge had turned her muscles to iron, opened the creative caverns of her mind but years away from the caustic tongue of her mother did not erase the burns, much as the dwarrow had tried to apply balm to it.

“Being stupid is what I’m good at. Running to Mother in the first place? Stupid. Running away from my people and thinking nothing bad would happen? Stupid. Hiding away here? Stupid. Ember is a stupid princess and she makes a stupid dwarf too. If you need stupid, turn to me. Might as well die trying to do something good *and* stupid.”

“Black Star. *Alcula*,” Friga said it in common and in dwarven, to exacerbate her point. “You are burning your soul again.”

“I should. Not doing anyone any good so don’t see why I shouldn’t be honest about it.”

“*Alcula*,” The dwarrow approached, took her hand. “Come. The forge.”

“Friga, I mess up any projects I do.”

“Come.”

Pressured, she did and they ventured to the small fire spot. Ember’s current strength was forged here, steadily, over the years. Muscle laid upon muscle with each swing of the hammer, each bend of the metal. A familiar and comforting place. Once there, nothing was said, not in common nor dwarven. Friga simply placed a slab of metal in the fire, pulled the girl’s long hair in three simple braids, handed the hammer

worn with Ember's hand over and stood back.

As it usually was when these fits of self-doubt came on, the best thing to do first was eliminate the energy. Pounding on metal was a task requiring all kinds of physical and mental focus and it served the purpose well. Until the emotional height was down, talking would do little good. Same result as trying to talk to someone in the midst of a battle-high.

So, Friga waited.

Ember pounded. Hammer up, then down, the resulting clang on the anvil. As usual, she didn't really have anything in mind when she started. The mind seemed to figure itself out better when you started blank and frankly, all she could think about was Tim, her people, the land, and everything except what she was doing. Emery who had already lost her husband and daughter, how much more could she take? How much more could *any* of them take? Took most of her focus not to slam her fingers or burn her wrists (both of which she had done numerous times).

Heat, beat, repeat.

For a time, that was all she did. Her mind swirled and wandered but never too far as the chime of the hammer on metal was an expert at calling it back. The heat of the forge and the sting of the flames drew sweat and tears from her eyes. Wiping them away with her forearm, the metal in front of her took shape. Long and slender, with a groove to be made down the center. A sword.

Magic occurred in the forge, in more ways than one. It was the realm of Düle—of creation. The fires of the forge chased out energy; diluting and paling the body but feeding the energies of imagination and strength. Sweat and tears were mere representations of the process occurring. It was why when any dwarf finished in the forge or completed a project, they would cry "*düle*!" to push all the spirit of creation into what had been finished. It was dwarven power.

Dwarven magic.

While the body grew weak upon the hours of labor, the heart grew full and spirit awakened.

When her arms grew heavy with wear and her legs slick with drain, Ember slunk to the nearby chair and sat, her metal still upon the anvil. She waited, breath heavy and body worn, as the spirit fed, nourished, and reconnected the body and mind into one solid entity.

Taking the canteen offered to her, she downed a few sips before handing it back. "*Kuka*, Friga." Formal perhaps but she always felt the

need to do so once her emotions no longer commanded her. It happened less and less frequently but when it did occur, she drowned in it.

Friga, Tyr, Kva. Even Maur pulled her out of it.

Pushing a loose strand of her hair back, she left a smear of blackened soot on her face, but given the forge itself had painted her a lovely grey, it added a touch of character. While the her from five years ago would have winced at dirtying herself, it meant something different now.

Friga lifted up the metal, observed the deep curves and tips beginning to form, even with as short a session as this had been. "I hardly consider this messing up a project."

Ember shrugged.

Reaching over to the storage rack, the old dwarrow pulled blade by blade into the light, slamming them one by one onto the bench. "You do Mother Stone well with each of these." She selected the newest one—a blade with a curved tip and a deep golden brown handle. Tracing the edge of the metal with her finger, Friga let her hands fit to the carved hilt, one that fit her palm as much as if it had been molded from it. "Your spirit lies in these. Do you truly look at them with contempt, Black Star?"

Finally drawn to look up, Ember took the blade offered and caressed the hours of work. Burns, welts, curses at the metal for its refusal to bend as she desired it. Yet, here it was, forged into a curved edge, a glorious talon blade as her victory.

"I am proud of it." She admitted. "I worked hard for it."

"Same thing applies here." Friga leaned against the work bench, propping her knee up and leaning her weight upon it. "If your statement of all your projects being messed up were true, that blade would not be here. But it is. And so are you. Stands to reason that your other statements were nothin' but falsities too, wouldn't it?"

Caught amid a protest, Ember heaved an exhale. "Fine. Fine, maybe not all my projects were disasters. And maybe I haven't been doing… nothing but it hasn't changed anything. Is that any different?" She set her blade back on the rack. "I need to do something that will make a difference."

"Your attempts do make a difference." Brushing her hands over the burns decorating the woman's skin, Friga shook her head. "You can't see everything, my Girl. Even when we look at metal we have mined, refined, and turned to liquid, we cannot see everything within it. Stop holding yourself accountable for things you are not at fault for. You've given your blood and sweat trying. That is worth more than its weight in labor." When the young woman gave another sigh and shook her head,

Friga changed her approach. She'd gotten her to admit that she was doing something. She'd gotten her to stop attacking herself. Some days, little victories were what mattered. "I did get some word from the Council the other day. And it might match up with what you overheard."

Hope was a violent and raging drug. It held and maintained its high for much longer than anything natural one might place on the tongue. Given by the voice of a loved one, a trusted one, increased its power ten-fold and Ember craved any sampling of it.

"Really? What? What word? What did the Council say? Did they—"

"Child!" Despite the seriousness of the moment, Friga laughed because the light reentered Ember's eyes. "Calm your loins. I don't want you to have your gems pre-counted, nothing is quenched yet."

Taking a half a heartbeat to still her breath, Ember closed her eyes. Hope gnawed at her breast, trying to explode from her in any way it could. If given a tangible form, she would have consumed it. Without such an option, she cooled her spirit and waited. Patience was something time in the forge's fire had taught her well.

But the impulsivity native to her spirit was hard to tame.

"Right. When will you know?"

"Probably two moons." Friga took a swig of the water canteen. "Hard to tell with the Council, but I can get Maur to lend me a little influence." After a moment's hesitation, she added. "And Oina has been working her magic among them, too. That dwarrow is blessed with a tongue of gold and eyes of fire."

"Kva's been talking about that lately. I didn't know she'd pressured her girlfriend to help." She frowned. "I don't want to add any weight to their relationship."

"You wouldn't have been able to if Oina wasn't willing. Much as she loves Kva and mark my words if they don't take their vows before the year is up, Oina is also her own person. If she didn't think doing this was worth the effort, she wouldn't."

Well, no argument there. Oina would tell off Mother Stone Herself if she felt the need. "So, something the Council is working on can help? Is that what you're saying, Friga?"

"Possibly. Nothing is set yet." Friga pressed, fierce and true. "I don't want you getting excited or fretting over somethin' that hasn't happened yet." Her eyes softened, warmed even amid the heat of the room. They carried different warmth, an internal one rolling and caressing rather than struck and tarnished. "No worry until there's somethin' to worry

about, hear me?"

She couldn't blame Friga for the reminder. Decisions always carried anxiety with them. If she could make any choice without doing a thousand and one flips in her mind, it was a miracle. Friga would call her out if she thought she was stewing, but it was hard not to. No matter what, no matter how she prepared, so many thoughts would rush her mind. Old memories, new memories and she got the distinct impression her brain was trying to kill her.

She needed to conquer that because this could be the light amid the mine for her. Five years of growing, changing and always checking, always trying, always hoping. Maybe it was finally at her door? "Can you tell me…anything about it?" Pleading was not something she was accustomed to doing, not for a long time. "Friga, what did you find out?"

Sighing, the older dwarrow exhaled, seemingly to expand her entire lung hold into the air. "Wasn't real sure until you started talkin' 'bout the ol' knights mentioning Gralcimm."

Interest burned.

"What about it? What about what they said?"

"Like I said, Black Star." Picking the hammer up to offer it to the table with the statement of 'create,' Friga offered a hand to the young woman. "Nothing solid yet. But we've heard some words from Bofun about the kingdom and it doesn't match up with what you heard."

"No?" Standing, she gave a low '*düle*' herself—more quickly than she normally did and she hoped it was not taken as dismissive—as they exited the forge before she rushed to lead the way out, as if they would rush to the Council that very moment. "How different? Why? How is it—?"

"Ember." The dwarrow extinguished the fire, closed the forge door and followed the woman out to the main living quarters. "That's why I didn't want to tell you just yet. We don't know the answers to any of those. The Council sent a group to scout it out and return. They should give us our answers within two days."

Two days. Never before had such a small amount of time seemed so long. Every ounce of her being told her to rush, to run, to refuse to wait and to accomplish something now. To not let another second pass.

"Watch yourself."

Turning, Ember gave a low yelp when a small digger dog dropped into her arms.

Digger dogs had been her first real surprise about the dwarves. She'd nearly thought them to be large rats at first glance. Hard to blame her—

they were long, small with long snouts but Ember grew attached quite easily. Always working, they were: digging tunnels and scouting out different scents, exploring different avenues within the caves and the thought had never occurred to her about how useful a tiny dog would have been. It was hard to imagine working without them now. After about a year, Friga had surprised her with a digger dog of her own.

Thus, the barking and sniffing pup currently deposited in her arms.

"Take Aufe and go relax. Go mine, cut gems, chase that boyfriend of yours." Flicking the courtship braid, the dwarrow laughed. "He can always help you relax and Aufe keeps you focused."

Looking down, a warm smile covered Ember's face. Aufe, the small dog in question, had her triangle ears open and free, the golden color from which she took her name carrying the creature's energetic glow. With a half yip of encouragement, she planted a long lick to her mistress' nose.

"All right, Friga. You and Aufe win."



"AGAIN, AUFE!"

Ember tossed the tiny disc of leather and it skidded along the water's edge. The tiny dog scampered after it, her barks echoing through the cavern, giving her a much louder sound than one would expect from something a wee bit taller than a human ankle. Her long body twisted and bounced as she caught the leather toy and hurried back to her partner.

Dwarves did not own their dogs after all. They were partners with them, friends, allies.

Sitting by the edge of the lake, Ember smiled, a pale one, as she scratched the small animal behind the ear. Aufe was quick to roll onto her back and show her stomach, a nonverbal cue such affections should be continued as long as possible. Seeing the dog smile gave more weight to Ember's smile. Hard to focus on her worries with puppy dog eyes staring up at her.

It was a distraction and a useful one. When her mind would race, Ember found it helpful to fill her mind with something else, especially if there were no answers to be had. Playing with Aufe was always a happy

event.

Was this going to be the cornerstone, the change that would set everything in motion she had dreamed about, awoke screaming about for the last five years? It seemed amazing it could be done and over with when her mind had refused to let her rest on it—

Don't be an idiot. Nothing is over and done that quickly.

Well, granted, it wouldn't be done entirely, not yet. But it could be the first step.

Then what?

Her mind was in rare form today. Self-doubt and questioning had become commonplace since chaos sent her rushing away from the palace but the closer she came to the potential solution, the more violent and caustic the inner voice became.

Things she preferred not to repeat in mixed company, but would call herself routinely.

Questions about what she could have and should have done were frequent.

Even when she tried to ignore it, tried to focus on the now and not the then, she would see the light scars her mother had left on her face that day. Most people wouldn't even notice a shadow of them anymore but she could never unsee them.

Even now, when she was purposely trying to avoid thinking about something she had no power over, an idea would squeeze its way to the front of her mind.

Tim's cold body, she could still feel it on her skin.

The empty sockets, they bored into her.

The crinkling of roasted flesh torn by the sun and the shifting of broken bone slithered through her body.

It lingered; the presence permeated her skin, through her bones, and into the spirit at her core. Memory refused to relinquish its grip and all she could do was sit, close her eyes, and hope for it to pass, trying to replace the scent of rotten flesh and decaying organs with her dog's sweet fur or the smell of salt and butter and…

"Here."

Turning, she backed up when Tyr pushed the bread roll into her face. That was where the smell of paradise had originated from. She'd expected him to show up; he usually had an uncanny sense of when she needed his heart-talk but she'd not expected him to come bearing gifts.

As soon as she could, she grasped it, recognizing the buttered fried outside, the salt, and sugar, and—yes! With a bite, the warm taste of

three kinds of melted cheese tickled her tongue. How the dwarves managed to get it to melt to ooze into the bread, but not burn the tongue remained a mystery. She gave a pinch of it to Aufe, who had sat up, immediately intrigued, but with such a thing, she was not going to share much. An ear scratch would have to appease the dog instead.

Swallowing, Ember paused before she took her next bite. "What are you doing here, Tyr?"

He sat. "Heard the news about the coming news. I know your heart's still bleeding from what we found out and this both helps and doesn't help. I know you want answers and having to wait is welts and burns. The glass pond is your mope-spot and your sad-spot. Do you wanna be alone?" He shifted, midway through sitting and standing. "I know sometimes your mind needs people and sometimes—"

"...no. You can stay."

He leaned back and kept quiet, silent but present. After a moment, he shifted and flopped to the ground, the dust billowing up with the gravity of his weight. Aufe jumped from Ember's feet to Tyr's lap, tongue lounging and happy yips informing the dwarf she did indeed remember him. With a light laugh, Tyr ruffled the dog's head, gently bending her ears.

Ember swallowed a third bite then said. "You know, human boys could learn something from dwarves." It was odd, she hadn't given much thought to human boys in a while. Maybe it was the looming presence of Gralcimm and the very real fear that Lance had fallen into trouble as she had.

Somehow, she doubted it. Yet, she also wondered.

Lance, were you trapped inside your own mind all this time? If you're still alive, are you still locked inside your own mind?

She'd all but forgotten there was more than her kingdom at risk. Now, with the prospect of answers coming from Gralcimm, realization sank on her with the weight of a thousand gems. How could she have simply forgotten or dismissed that her people weren't alone in their peril?

It wasn't just Farmer Tim, it wasn't just poor, lonely Emery, it wasn't just loyal Jacob.

Stupid. Stupid and selfish. *Become pretty standard for me.*

A gentle touch to her hand was a much needed anchor. Swallowing, she turned to face Tyr and laughed under her breath. One of her favorite traits about him was the way he never failed to provide emotional expressions.

The wide eyes, the half tilted smile and his loose hair fluttering in the low breeze amid the cavern gave a dot of sunlight to her spirit. In the mixture of uncertainty flooding her mind, knowing he would forever be honest with her was a much needed consistency.

"You look silly. Does it surprise you so much?" She leaned back and Tyr caught her around the shoulders.

"A little. Humans and dwarves are different, but it's hard for me to remember sometimes with you. You just need the tattoos."

Rubbing her hairline subconsciously, she stated, "Never felt right to take those." After all, she wasn't one of them, was she? Always a human daughter in exile—

"If you weren't worthy of it, no one would do it."

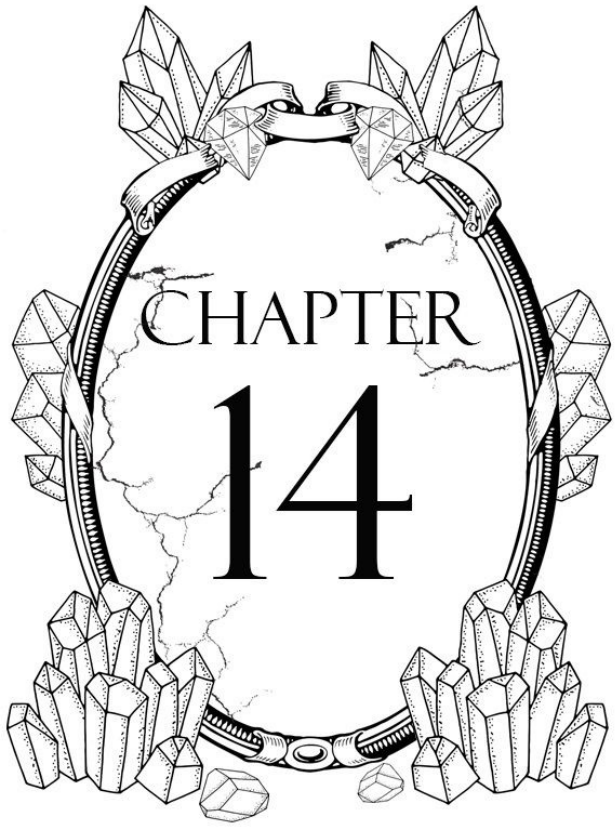
The prospect was comforting, to a degree, but she couldn't focus. Not now. So, she didn't. Digging her teeth into the savory bread in her hands, she took another hefty bite, swallowing and remarked, pulling off a piece and popping it into Tyr's mouth. "Dwarves make a lot more sense than humans do."

She took another bite, talking around her chewing. "Human boy woulda brought me flowers or jewels and told me how blessed I was."

"Not very effective, is it?"

"No. Add guilt onto me already feeling like crap. But...Tyr, you get me. You bring me fried food and sit here to let me vent on how life sometimes sucks and I don't know what to do with it. Can't wager something better than that."

Reaching down, Tyr dug amid the softer silt near the shore and produced a handful of tiny stones, irregular but still heavy with weight. He offered an open palm of them with a smile. "Sometimes chucking rocks helps, too.



"Aufe, there. Down there. See the little gem? Go get it for me, go on, girl."

With a sniffle and low yelp, the golden furred dog scurried forward, darting down the opening, her tiny claws scratching and digging into the rock and grime. The upkick of dust would have triggered a sneeze several years ago but the smell of granite and iron was a familiar friend for Ember after so many years.

She leveled a smile as the small upturned tail of her canine companion vanished into the dark tunnel. The walls of *Oria* as the miners had come to call it (after the warrior who won a war by digging multiple tunnels with the intent to confuse her enemies), was a delicate digging place but one with ripe rewards.

Dwarves valued colored stones far more than diamonds or crystals, a

sentiment she echoed with fervor. Colors caught and reflected light, giving a much more pleasing ambiance. For herself, she had taken to weaving them into her braids. All colors but green. Green still carried too hard a memory.

The Dwarven six-pointed star held the significance of their six sacred fires and she wore her long hair layered to form one on the back of the head. One for each flame color, one for each element of dwarven life: effort, loyalty, bravery, creativity, tenacity, and love.

I want to look like I belong here.

Being easy to spot with red, orange, yellow, and blue stones catching the light at every fold of hair, their sparkle ignited a sense of pride in her —it flooded the negative memories out so she was all too happy to indulge in it. With the influx of old memories and what she'd dubbed her 'self-murdering voice,' anything that could build the protective emotional wall, she welcomed.

She couldn't force the Council to obtain the answers any quicker than they would.

A low yip came from within the walls and a moment later, the snout of her loyal canine poked out, a glittering chunk of rock wedged in her teeth.

"Good girl!" Retrieving the stone, Ember laid her forehead on the dog's, an imitation of the soul's eye dwarves often did with their loved ones. She lacked the spiritual ability but Aufe understood her closeness regardless if the wagging tail was any indication.

Rubbing the dog behind the ears, she dropped the stone amid the collection of other gems earthed from the mining wall. Ember settled on the edge of the tunnel, eyes tilted upward. Hardly much to speak of for support, aside from her foot and hand holds, and she looked over the prizes her dog had found.

Kva and Oina had told her the deeper tunnels contained traces of autumn stone. It was a rare stone, even for dwarves, but if someone could find one, it added much needed beauty to any piece of work. Like the autumn leaves, autumn stone would shift colors from green to violet or in some pieces from red to green, all dependent on its environment.

Perfect for petals.

Thanks to Aufe, she had the missing piece to add to her project.

"Thank you, my little, furry Princess." Allowing the dog to give her a lick to the nose, she pocketed the stone in her knapsack, set her picks and hammers in her belt and strapped Aufe into the harness about her chest. While the dog could most likely burrow her way to the surface if given

enough time, they were a ways down. She'd rather not risk her canine friend.

Chester had succumbed to age not too long ago and she had no desire to revisit that heart ache.

Grasping the rope and climbing pick, Ember ascended, feet scraping the loose stones occasionally, sending a shower of dust below. She called her apologies to anyone who had the misfortune to be working below her. Probably could have avoided the shower of rock if she went slower but that had never been a strong point for her. Before long, the top came into view, level and full of dwarves comparing their finds or preparing for a descent.

"Well, as the Stone crumbles, I thought I saw your shimmers."

The voice being entirely in dwarven was the giveaway before she even saw the blue tint and black hair. His gruff outward look always gave him away.

It had been a while since she'd seen Maur!

"Maur!" She responded in Dwarven, her accent and rather rough vowels would have kept anyone from thinking her a natural born speaker. Kneeling over lightly, she moved to sit on her knees and welcomed the embrace. An unnecessary gesture but one done with respect. Much as her first interaction with him had been awkward, once the secret of dwarven flowed more readily from her tongue, uncertainty fled. Only her accent gave away dwarven was not her first language. "How are you? I didn't know you were coming to mine today."

"Can't keep a dwarf from the craft any more than you can keep the moon from the night, little flame." Giving a scratch to the dog as Ember released her from her harness and stood, he clapped her lightly to the back. "Find anything good in those tunnels? You dig much deeper and you'll come out the other side." He scoffed. "Had to catch an uppity new-ster just this morning."

"They fall like I did?" That had been a shock. Why she'd assumed the rock would continue to support her when her eyes saw no more cliff remained one of her most egregious errors and she doubted there would ever come a time when she wouldn't turn bright red at the thought.

"Expected of you. Hadn't been lifting a pick for more than a month when it happened. Surprised you didn't fall earlier. This youngster didn't have that excuse. This one was just drunk on themselves." Shaking his head, Maur added, "Not allowed to fall enough when they were ground level." The word had a double-meaning in Dwarven; it meant either a young age or literally, the first level in the cavern. She suspected

he meant both.

"Well, they were lucky you were there." She smiled and gave him a light wink with one of her eyes. "Their ears might not have been glad after you pulled them up." Maur was never shy about discussing errors and while harsh, it was not cruel. She'd come to respect it.

The first time being on the receiving end of one his lectures, though, was uncomfortable.

"Adding some burning in the ears prevents broken bones." Maur folded his arms. "You find what you were looking for or are the rumors 'bout the gems deep down just fancy talk by younglings who want a little limelight?"

"What I was looking for." Twisting the stone from her knapsack, she offered the prize to Maur's more experienced eyes. "Autumn stone!"

A low chuckle came from Maur's throat as he turned it over in his hands. "So it is. Heard there might be some trickling in those ores. Seems a mighty small piece for all the trouble. Especially knowing how you climb." He gave a pointed look to the ropes and harnesses she stripped off and set aside. Traveling strictly by foot and hand holds, without the aid of ropes, was still out of her reach.

"I've had a project in mind for a while and Friga got me motivated on it again last night." She accepted the autumn stone back from him and held it tight in her palm.

"Your flowers?"

After a light moment of pause, Ember shook her head. "Can't really hide much from you, can I?"

"Projects born from the heart rarely stay hidden." Setting his eyes upon her finds, he took hold of one stone resting on top. "Blue seems to be your color."

"It suits. I have so many to make, I thought having a common theme might be better than a designer mark." She shifted her bag a bit on the shoulder and gently stroked Aufe's ears as the pup wove about her legs. "Not quite that talented yet."

"Foolish tongues tell lies." Maur fell in stride, walking along the left side as she made her way back towards the main pathways, leaving the rumble and dust of the mining behind them. "You've your own talents, different, but no less treasured."

Ember didn't say anything else. The flowers she worked on hardly matched up to Tyr's work that he had blessed her father's memory with, but she had to try. Each of the ninety-five flowers she had made thus far came with a name attached to them, if not a face.

One flower for each lost child from the War of Three. Such a small quantity against the large number lost.

"Yellow Elder finally told me their names." The term had become her common name for Wali, the Elder who seemed most opposed to her presence, though it had cooled over the years.

She spoke softly, almost to herself. "I wrote them down."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

"You bring them honor, Little Flame."

Honor? No. They deserved better than her meager flower offering in the Lake of Memory. "They deserve more. Better. It's all I can give but they deserve more."

Maur simply glanced forward, his silent status saying more about his opinion than any layering of words would.

Ember flustered. Silence, except in certain circumstances, always collapsed on her. Her thoughts would race, questions about her words, her beliefs, her motions being brought forward with all the intensity of a flood. A light feathery pace took her breath, ragged and fast.

Aufe nuzzled at her ankle, whimpering low, at the shift of mood. The gentle padding of fur was a reminder, a pull back to the moment and Ember glanced down, scooped the pup up back into her arms and rested her head on the dog's, relishing the soft half-barks and whines.

"The Council's expecting their answer-bringers tonight." Maur tapped Ember's hand, six times, a small but subtle affectionate gesture. Six breaths the Stone Mother gave for life. Six She gave now to bring her comfort. "Don't help you much now, does it?"

Shaking her head, she said, "No."

"The voice echo back?"

Sighing, she nodded. "Yeah. Ever since we came back from exploring the outskirts—"

"Why do you keep going back, Little Flame?" He walked by her side, shaking his head, his long beard trailing amid his chest. "It don't do nothing but hurt you."

"I have to." Pure emotion burned her throat. "Tim's dead, Maur." Her voice trembled, wavered like a broken wave on the sea. "He's dead and he's dead because he was trying to run. They shot him." Quivering, she sank to the ground, staring at her hands, obsessively opening and closing them into tight fists. "In the back. They shot him because he was trying to get away."

Maur stopped, put his fingers to the center of his forehead, where the

soul eye rested. He reached out and placed a large finger, crusted with callus, in-between her eyes. Closing her eyes in response, she waited.

He inhaled, deliberately, six times in quick succession. "May the Stone Mother care for him. But Little Flame, him dying was not your fault."

"It was!" Here, she was insistent. "If I was there then—"

"Then what? You think you could have said anything to stop a knight from firing on one of their own?" Snorting, he shook his head, disgust coloring his eyes. "Nothing can stop a heart that's turned hard as stone. And you don't owe that cold heart anything."

"They didn't used to be that way! It's…they're like…" Stumbling over her words, she sought through her knowledge of dwarven and settled on the word. "*Bukba. Bu*kba, all of it."

Bukba was one of the dwarven words Ember came to adore because there was no real equivalent in common. *Bukba*, like a lot of their words, lived in their legends, in particular *Bukba* was a monster who drained life from everything they touched—animal, person, land, water, and even air. Yet what had always clung to her with the intensity of winter's first chill was the poisonous effect spread to the spirit. Anyone he touched lost themselves, even among the undead. Flesh on flesh, a flicker of hair to skin, was all it required to send the soul aspiral.

Hence, the dwarven people burned their dead.

But ever since the supposed time, the word of that monster *Bukba* came to mean a poison killing everything and anything, from flesh to air to soul.

"Fae." Maur's voice was simple. "Their standard practice."

Desperation flooded her, from head to toe. "You've fought Fae before."

"More than I want to recall. Spells abound in those fights and they use anything they can—earth, animals, people." Nudging a rock aside with his foot, he said, "Fae don't think nothing of anyone but themselves unless they have to. Bit surprised we ain't seen more Fae in the kingdom."

Stopping in her pace, she asked, tingling in her heart. "You think the Fae was…a head Fae?"

"No." He was insistent. "Too chaotic, even for a Fae. Rogue Fae maybe."

"A rogue Fae?"

"Same as the rest of us, got folk that break away."

"That should be good!" Ember turned to him and clamped his

shoulders tight in her hands. “If they can’t call on help—”

“How many times have you seen people leave that don’t got a friend or two?”

Caught by surprise, she paused, thought, and considered. “Not many I guess?”

“You guessing or answering?”

Frowning, she tightened her face. This was a common response, one all the dwarves said was good for her. Take pride in her answer, good or ill! “A-answering.”

Far easier to say that than to believe it.

“Good.” He patted her hand. “If you’re not afraid of failing, you won’t hesitate so much. The voice in our head is always crueler than the rest of the world. But, you’re right. Even Fae make friends and I would bet you my last three months’ of labor the Council has something to say about another Fae in Gralcimm.”

Another… “Another one? I can’t even save my people from one! And now there might be a second?”

Crushed, mentally, Ember sank to her knees, her pup barking frantically in her ear at the drop. “It’s hopeless then, isn’t it?”

“Bah!” Ember winced when a light pressure touched her forehead. Looking up, she yelped when Maur rapped the flesh between her eyes again. Just firm enough to command attention, without any true pain involved.

“Nonsense. If anything, might give us a better chance. Fae always leave behind clues and if your kingdom’s the focus now, might be able to get some clues solved with whatever’s left of Gralcimm.”

Whatever’s left. With what she saw with her home, what could be worse? Stomach twisted at the thought of it, she bit her lip and coiled her hands, tight and firm.

“But it won’t do you any good to worry until you know what you’re working with, will it?”

“No.” He was right on that end. “No, it won’t.”

“But your echo-voice is already starting to serenade.” It wasn’t a question. “I see it. Don’t let it take root. It’s persistent when it does.”

“You say that like it’s simple!” Anger trickled into her heart. “All of you sprout it off like I can just turn it off and it doesn’t work that way!”

“Never said it was simple.” Somehow, no matter how angry she was, he always managed to respond with coolness setting her inner fire at ease. “Most good things for you aren’t simple. Or easy. But doesn’t mean we shouldn’t still do them. And make sure you lay blame for this where

it lies. That's not with you. It never has been. Never will be."

"So you and everyone else love to tell me. Wish I could believe it." Huffing lightly, she rubbed the stone settled in her hand. "I was working on a project. On my flowers. Figured it would help me to stay focused. So far, seems I'm failing."

Maur nudged her in the side, a low slap on the back to follow. "Maybe you need a good meditation time in the forge. Nothing quite like working up a sweat to drive away mad obsessions."

Maybe. Seemed to be Maur's answer to almost everything. Work it out, sweat, become so tired one couldn't think straight if they wanted to. Ember could appreciate it and definitely had found it worked on the occasions she remembered to leave enough strength in the limbs to drag into bed.

Perhaps a trip down to the communal forge wasn't a bad idea. Or maybe to the Quenching Lake, where they gathered the water and oils to coat the blades. She had a feeling she might run into Tyr down there and she was always up for that. If there was anything to could distract her from these racing ideas and thoughts, his sweat toned body was one of them.



"GET UP."

Tyr turned, lifting his eyes and an extended hand in his face greeted him. Soot covered and calloused, much like his own, the height difference gave her away.

"Hey, Ember. You heard?"

"Sort of. I was in the forge and heard those chattering bats." Her face turned deep and sorrowful. "I should have been there to watch you compete. I forgot. I can't believe I forgot." Pouting, looking more child than adult, she stated. "I wanted to see you hammering."

Tyr smiled, despite the emotions churning in his stomach and the weight coating his muscles like molten lead, pulling them down yet making them feel without any strength. What an irony to his name. "I'm kind of glad you didn't. *Nanki* and *Manki* had to see me screw up. No reason you should have to as well." He meant it. He considered his work to be one of his attributes. Ember's first few years down here had created

the idea he was the ironworking God of the humans reincarnated. He rather preferred it stayed that way.

"Well, I'm sad I missed it. I'm sure you did good, great even!" Her smile lit up the cavern as well as any torch would have, but the warmth from it served to pull his spirit down further, enough he felt drowned without even touching the water.

"Good?" He lifted the dagger, shattered right in half down the blade. "You call this good?"

Her face contorted, eyes narrowed, brow crinkled. "How long did it last in the tests?"

"Ten—"

"Ten strokes against solid iron? Yeah, I'd call that good."

"It still broke." An embarrassing development it was. "Not like Brother-of-my-Father's. Not like *Manki* or *Nanki*." Perhaps that was the worst.

Kneeling, Ember corrected. "And all of them have been doing this longer than either of us have been alive—combined! Did anyone scold you?" Darkness colored her grey eyes, turning them from a cloudy day to a storm of warning. "If they did, I'll—"

"No."

"Shake their heads in disappointment?"

"No."

"Say anything?"

Tyr paused, then repeated, "You did well, my son. The first of many mistakes."

Ember stood again. "See? Haven't you told me so many times you can't learn without mistakes?"

He eyed her, trying to be annoyed at having his words thrown back at him but failing. "Now you listen."

"Cause I've seen it's true. What did you learn?"

He eyed the blade. "Don't quench it so fast next time. Leave it in longer. Don't work so fast."

Ember wiggled her fingers, invitingly, at him. This time, he took them, intertwining them as she pulled and he made his way to his feet. "I'd call that a victory then, Tyr."

"Not the one I wanted." He grinned and the light came back into his eyes. "But I'll take it." He hugged her. "I guess even I need the reminder sometimes."

She tightened her grip, rubbing his punished fingers with her own. "Then come on. This calls for a victory dinner. And I promise I won't

cook it."

Tyr winced, his eyes scrunched in a failed attempt to not comment. "I wouldn't mind if you did."

"Well, I would. I don't have any intention of dying by undercooked meat or by spices that should not be combined or by creating some sludge that has the ability to melt lead."

Tyr leaned against her side. "Well, I suppose when you put it like that. I can cook!"

"I bet Friga has some good food tonight. We're supposed to be celebrating you, remember? Doesn't seem right to make you cook."

He looked at her, blue eyes aglow. "Well, I think I owe you something for pulling me out of my funk."

"You do it for me all the time. Only fair."

"Still…"

The two headed off down the corridor, leaving the cool solitude of the cavern behind, aiming for the bustle of the centerfold of the city. As they neared the entryway, the blue lanterns coloring their faces, Ember ducked and placed her mouth near Tyr's left ear.

"If you really want to 'owe' me something, I'm rather miffed I didn't get to see you hammering at the anvil today."

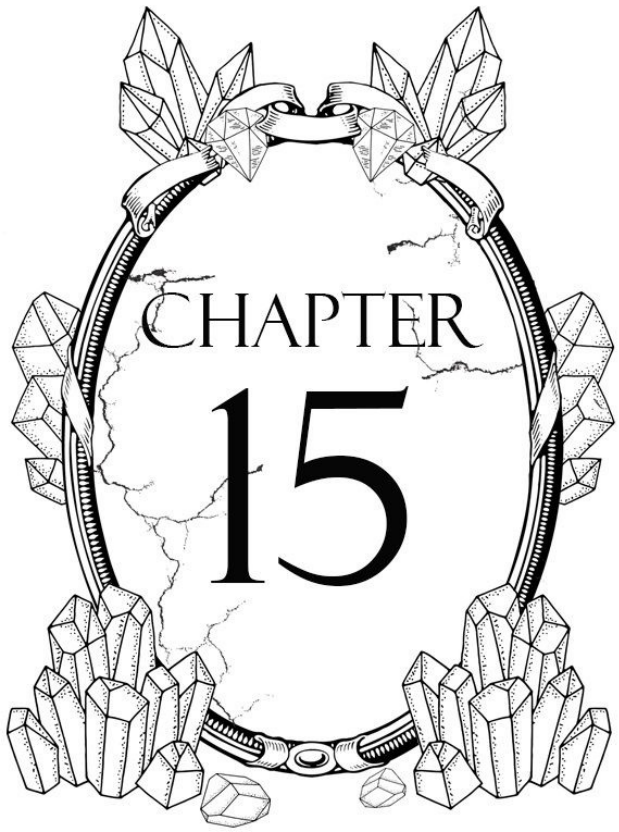
Giving her a sly grin, he feigned shock, even heightened his voice somewhat, as much as he could manage. "Aw, you missed seeing me pound metal, slam, slam, slam, one right after the other?"

"Yes." Pushing her cheek to his, being careful to avoid his hair, she said, "You can break rock with your bare hands and your muscles show it. Is it so wrong for me to want to see it?"

"You just want to see me with my shirt off."

"That would be nice, yes."

"Well, depending on how good a meal you can convince Friga to make, maybe we can arrange a private session later."



"You don't miss regular star gazing?"

Ember gave a dismissive shrug. "Well, sure, sometimes. I mean, I used to love doing it, looking up at the sky and imagining all kinds of fairies and miracles and wishes coming true." Her eyes drifted downward. "Been a long time since I've done that."

Tyr rubbed his thumb with one hand, tugged on his braids with another "I'd…we can go to the top of the mountain to look if you want."

Giggling, she shook her head, laid it on his shoulder. "You act like a frantic goat up there. 'Sides, I think I almost like these more." Sighing in contentment, she added, "What more could I ask for? A good meal, my boyfriend more than willing to show off his skills at the forge—in bare-skinned glory at that—and now a trip to the moonlight caverns? Hard to top that, Tyr."

Looking upward, she marveled at the thousands of gems, glittering amid the light moonlight from the upper tunnels. The sapphires caught the light and came alive, coating the room in blue. The emeralds gave a light dusting of green that settled into her eyes, giving them an otherworldly sheen and the rubies, topazes, and diamonds danced with one another, a delicate shimmer making the whole cavern breathe in color.

"Do you, really?"

Ember reached down and pulled a piece of sapphire from the wall, chipping away at the rock. Being so prevalent here, it came loose easily and she passed it to Tyr. The dark blue hummed with a life of its own.

With a knowing smile, Tyr took out his chisel and in no time at all, handed her back what looked to be a sea urchin made entirely of gem, six pointed spikes erected in just the right balance that it sat upright on her palm. The spines sparkled and reflected the light at a different angle, depending on which way Ember turned it.

Holding it up to catch the moon peaking in the roof opening, dark blue washed the cavern walls setting all the other colors alight, a moving rainbow, jumping from shade to shade.

Grinning at Tyr, she snuggled to his side and turned his gift to and fro in her hands, marveling at the sparkles of color it dashed her face with.

"Really. After all, how many girls have someone that can make stars for them?" That truly was what the blue gem reminded her of, it had all those intricate spines in it. If it turned and shimmered in the light, it felt like she held a star right against her chest.

He chuckled, leaned against her ear. "I'd like to try a moon if you'd let me."

Gently flicking his nose, she settled, moving to half recline so she could rest her head in his lap. "I've already got my moonlight." Nuzzling deeper, she inhaled and drowned in his scent. "I prefer it to the real thing."



"YOU'VE GOTTEN PRETTY good at that."

Ember twirled the hilt, enjoying the feel of the blade in her hand.

She'd never considered herself as one for weapons, but once she had the opportunity to learn, there was a freedom to be found in hacking things up, especially if she was in a mood. Excellent emotional release.

With word on the Council still up in the air, she was rapidly running low on distractions, but sparring with weaponry with Tyr was one of the most engaging. For one, it let her improve her skills of self-defense, for two, it allowed her to spend some time with Tyr, for three, she got to marvel at the beautiful swords Tyr always managed to bring and for four, they were both sweaty by the end of it and a sweaty Tyr did things to her. Good things. She'd take it whenever she could.

"I've got some pretty good teachers." Ember countered, turning to face Tyr. "Even if I'm an insufferable student."

"You are. You're gonna run straight into a battlefield one day and not have a damn idea what to do. But that's good, in a way, if you can learn to harness it. Use the energy, not so much the stupidity."

Tyr unsheathed his own sword.

Ember let her eyes dance, exploring it, savoring it. Much as she might have wanted to resist, it was one of the craftsmanship she would always fall victim to. Five hundred layers of steel combined together created a beautiful aesthetic of circles and waves and the Dwarven touch gave it a strength and sharpness to be envied.

The way Tyr wove it around made it seem more like a dance than a battle strategy.

"Should I leave you and the blade alone?"

Giving his shoulder a light shove, she said, "Consider it a compliment. You made that thing, right? And *who* told you that you could do it?"

Twirling the blade himself, Tyr offered. "You did. Tell you what...when you can match me." He shifted his feet to practice stance. "I'll teach you the Voice of Damascus."

Her mouth dropped. "You'd...can you do that?!"

"If you've improved enough to match me, then I don't know why the metal'd not wanna talk to you. Metal's more sociable than Mother Stone."

Staring down at her own blade, eyes sparkling with anticipation, she said aloud, mostly to herself. "I could have a blade like starlight, too!"

Tyr settled, tapped the ground with his toe. "You could. If you think you can best me." His teasing grin drew a fierce growl from her.

"Consider it done."

"Ooo, confident?" Blue eyes agleam with joy, he took a step to the

side and took up his stance. It had become a task over the last few years to build up confidence in the girl. It still faltered at times, especially during periods of immense emotion. Like when they found Tim or when she was expressing the extent of the damage to Friga. In a way, he considered that a good thing. If she was willing to lose herself to emotion around them, it meant they were trusted.

He hoped the confidence and trust would be enough. With what the Council might end up saying or the ramifications of whatever news they might have come across, trust was one of the strongest factors.

Knowing her as well as he did, he wasn't sure it would stop her from rushing off and being rash.

On the same principle, he would not keep things from her. He had made a promise a long time ago, like all dwarves did once they were old enough to understand, to speak truth as well as the tongue could allow. There were ways around the vow, if one was sneaky enough, but Tyr refused to be conniving, at least to that depth. If someone tried that with him, he'd consider it a violation and he refused to do that to her.

To anyone, really, but especially to her.

Didn't mean he couldn't be careful about it. A little excursion might cool the mind.

Thus, that became his goal. To guide her steps, as well as her arms. To help her learn her swing and mind her aim. Goals with two purposes, really. To teach the skills but also to teach patience, waiting, thinking. Ember could do those things, but when she got riled up emotionally, not so much. Her temper was the worst offender.

There was calmness and serenity in her: he knew she could manifest, if she tried, truly tried.

She looked like a dove, fluttering about, her sword catching the refraction of light, her toes shifting this way and that to change her direction with nary a sound. The fact she'd encased the violet star he'd made her into a globe around her neck made his smile broaden. Maybe it was impractical for battle, but he knew all too well the importance of having a heart-charm.

They continued for hours. A break here and there but always back into the rhythm, back into the fighting dance as his *Manki* called it.

As the day wore into its later hours, he couldn't stay quiet anymore.

"Ember, I heard some news on the Council."

She turned, whipped around so quickly he swore he heard something crack in her neck. "What? When?"

"This morning—"

"And you're just telling me now?" Rising up, her eyes bored into him. "You know I've been waiting for any kind of message! Why didn't you tell me when we first got here?"

"Figured you needed time to calm down."

"Calm—Tyr, you ass!"

"Hey, I just know you can fly off like some kind of rapid bat sometimes and that almost never ends well. It didn't end well before, won't end well now." He was often loath to bring up her first disastrous attempts in the forge because, well, they were past now, but it was not an understatement to call them disastrous.

"Well, apparently I have to be to get anyone to be upfront with me!" Turning, she stormed off, her feet slamming into the ground with far more energy than was required. "Mother Stone bury you Tyr!"

Closing his eyes, he heaved a sigh, shaking his head. "Ember, don't take it personally. I want you to get your answers but I want you to—"

She had vanished out the door and judging by her footsteps, there was only one place she could possibly be going.

"Ember, Mother Stone Herself, listen!"



"EMBER! STOP!"

Stop? Stop? We're they really thinking to tell her to stop? Now?

Whirling around, she clenched her fists and her words hissed through her teeth, steaming with anger.

"No! Everyone's been telling me to wait, to be patient. Wait, wait, wait. I'm tired of waiting!"

Friga held up her hands as a gesture of peace. "Don't exaggerate—"

"Exaggerate? Nothing to exaggerate, Friga! If I hear wait one more time—"

"Well, you're gonna hear it because your thick head needs to. Wait."

Throwing up her arms, she stormed off, leaving Friga trailing her. First Tyr, then Friga. Tyr had all but run for his life when she threw his arm off after he took off after her. Probably for the best. If she talked to him right now, she suspected it wouldn't be pleasant. How could he have kept this from her?

Ignoring the dwarves by the entrance, who clearly recognized an

agitated Ember when they saw her, she kicked the doors at their center, twice, until they sprung open.

The inner chamber was full of the Elders and a sampling of other dwarves, gathered about the six sacred fires. They lifted their heads and stared at her. Awkwardness illuminated the room; she was an invader on a celebration she'd not been invited to.

"What did you find out?"

"Rather rude to intrude where you haven't yet been invited and make demands." Wali informed her; he had lost a lot of his sting since their first meeting, but this was rudeness by dwarven standards (and human too, for that matter) and he retreated to his cold stance when facing such behaviors.

She still routinely considered him as 'Yellow Elder,' though.

Ember couldn't say she really disliked him anymore; he had finally caved a bit and she owed it to him that she even had the means to pursue her flower-project. They crossed paths more often than not amid the marketplace, amid the upper tunnels between the Memory Lake and Friga's home. He even greeted her with something almost like warmth on most days.

Despite such facts, she couldn't say she liked him either.

"I wouldn't have to if someone would tell me what was happening. But none of you seem to want to do that. Well, you're not getting rid of me until I get answers." *Did they think this was a game?* There might be time to save Emery, to save Henriette, to pull her people out of this hell. *But only if they'll tell me!*

An exchange of glances between the group was not very reassuring.

"Look, this concerns me being able to go back and free my people." Setting Yellow Elder—Wali— in particular with a glare, she added. "I'd think you of all people would want that."

Ah. His face turned from her and his fingers tapped the stone carvings at his side. Nervous tic. "I've grown to tolerate you."

Closest thing to acceptance she'd get from the older dwarf and in any other circumstance, she'd have smiled at the thought. Not right now.

"So, what is it? I know it's about Gralcimm! So, what is it?"

Finally, the teal colored elder, Disan, answered. "A Fae has been spotted."

"A Fae?" Her discussions with Maur rushed her mind. So, his rumors had been spot on. "The same one?"

"No." The dwarf sitting in front of the Elders turned. "Didn't match your description from what they tell me. This one was yellow, like topaz

with emerald hair. Near as I could tell, it was male." He shrugged. "But I don't know if that was their real form or not."

"A second Fae then?" Yellow Elder tapped his fingers again, the repetition gnawed at Ember's nerves. Gnawed at them normally, anyway, but right now, those little taps were explosions in her ears. Gritting her teeth, she focused her energy forward.

"But probably connected to the first one." Ember paced. "Fae aren't solitary usually. Not allowed to be."

"Lots of talk for a girl barely past her second decade. Since when did you become an expert in Fae behavior?" Yellow Elder, as always, despite having learned to tolerate her as he said, never failed to draw comparisons between dwarf and human. As if she were a toddler scarcely able to comprehend what was at stake.

Retorting with viper venom on her tongue, she slammed her fist into her palm for emphasis. "Because unlike you I've learned how to listen to other people."

"At times," entered another voice.

Groaning, Ember looked skyward, head arched back. "Friga, by the Stone Mother…"

"You'd do good to learn something from the Stone Mother about patience." The dwarrow stalked in, arms folded. "Girl, we don't purposely try to keep you in the dark."

"Sure seems like that is exactly what you're doing. There's a Fae at Gralcimm! A Fae! You know well as I Fae don't usually work alone. If this one's popped up, it's probably linked to that damn Alyssum in my kingdom."

"Been talking to Maur, haven't you?"

"Least he's upfront."

"But you're my spark-stone." It was a nickname she'd acquired due to her tendency to leap and jump ahead without much waiting, like a spark from a stone.

Ember didn't deny it, but trying to contain it was aggravating. "Sometimes it's not a bad thing to want to act, Friga."

"It's not the acting, it's the lack of thinking before the acting."

"But they did see a Fae at Gralcimm." Shifting the conversation back to the topic at hand, she pressed. "Didn't they?"

The dwarf who'd announced the prospect nodded. "Aye. In and out of the city as if they own it."

"What about the humans in the city?"

Uncomfortable silence. The kind of quiet that came before the strike

of lightning. When Ember could almost see the rising tempers in the narrowed eyes and clenched teeth.

She ignored it.

"Will you just tell me?" Frustration boiled and bubbled out of her mouth. "Why is everyone afraid to tell me anything? It's not a hard question!"

"Your reactions don't exactly instill confidence." Friga murmured.

"I saw none." The dwarf answered. "None in or out of the palace."

"What about the fields?" Friga questioned, with an air of frustration to her voice. If they were going to move forward with this, then, well, they might as well get as much information as possible.

"Nothing there either. Just looks like the Fae."

Ember's fists tightened and ground. "No one?"

"Not that I saw."

Yellow Elder spoke up. "How does this relate to us? Aren't we concerned with the Fae currently in Ember's kingdom?" He paused. "Allegedly."

"Are your ears blocked?" Friga folded her arms. "Isn't likely the two Fae are separate. We learn about this Fae, we maybe learn about the other Fae. And unless you proclaim to be an expert on how to kill a Fae, we need all the information we can get."

Rebuked, he settled and did not retort.

Turning from one face to another, Ember was a mess of questions.

"When did you last see the Fae? Where are they spending the most time? Do they look versed in weaponry? Is there ever anyone else with them? Did you overhear them say anything—"

"Slow down!"

Ember turned as Friga gently tugged her arm.

"My girl, they're going to forget the first question you asked before you even finish talking. Ask again. Slower."

"It's all right." The dwarf in question smiled, a hint of appreciation in his face and warmth to his lips. "I like a take charge personality. Any particular order you want those questions answered in, Ember?"

"No. Just answered."

"All right then in order: just a few hours ago before I rushed back here. They like to frequent the northernmost tower. Hard to say, but they do haul a knife around with them so I assume some. They're talking to someone but can't say I can see anyone. I've heard mention of a mirror and a throne but nothing too detailed. Hard to get close enough to tell."

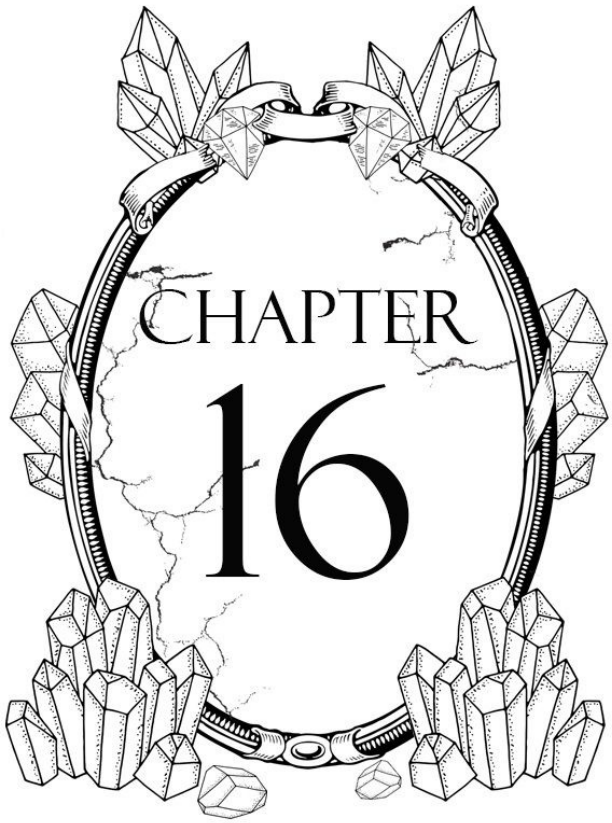
Ember nodded, mind turning in numerous directions. Sure seemed

like a connection and if they were mentioning that damned mirror then they had to know something. Not an easy task to get information from a Fae, but it might be worth it to try. As it was, she had no intel from inside her kingdom. Information from a fellow Fae might be the stepping stone she needed.

Turning on her heel, she made her way to the door. With each step, she moved faster.

"Ember! Wait! You don't mean to go plowing in there without a plan?"

She didn't respond, but made for the boats at the underground river. After so long, finally, a chance at answers and she wasn't going to wait around and let it pass her by.



The Kingdom of Gralcimm was dead.

There were no skeletons, no mass graves, no piles of rotting corpses, but there might as well have been. The smell of death permeated the atmosphere. Every breath, Ember choked on it.

More than that, her spirit felt it. She'd come up to the palace walls, darting from shadow to shadow to find it was pointless. No one was at guard. No one was walking the halls. No one was anywhere.

It was empty.

Her boots crunching over old tiles as she walked was deafening. It echoed and slithered, crawling up Ember's back and choking her. She glanced from one side to the other, trying to catch any guards rushing to repel an intruder in their home.

No one came.

Peering down the nearest corridor, she walked, unobstructed. The palace seemed immaculate. The chandeliers were shimmering, clean enough she would catch her reflection in them if she bothered. Tiles free of scuff and dirt. Curtains perfectly tied.

Creepy.

There was no life here. No sign of anything resembling life. It was as if the death she'd seen in the fields outside her home were drenching the air, creating a stench of rot and emptiness that weighed heavy on the lungs.

Imagining it was one thing; witnessing it was quite another. The barrenness surrounding her own kingdom seemed minuscule in comparison. If the death about her own kingdom was the cold of night then this place was the heart of winter's chill.

Onward, she walked.

The quiet made her senses tingle. It was amazing how loud footsteps were, breathing was, or even the heart pounding in the chest became with nothing else to drown them out.

Passing by the main hall, she peered inward, her eyes drifting over a circular room, but nothing stirred. Not even the door whispered a sound.

Heaving a sigh to herself, she withdrew, letting the door swing shut noiselessly behind her. "Too weird. This is too weird."

She caressed the star gem Tyr had given her, settled against her chest in its clear bubble of harden glass. She wrapped her fingers about it, hoping to pull some essence of him from his work, a soft comfort amid this uncertain fear.

Not normally one to talk to herself, even in the midst of a project, it was nearly a compulsion to do so here. Anything to disrupt the quiet.

"Like the explorers that first came upon Zadkhanûn." Ember found herself muttering, clinging to the old story for solace and comfort. "They'd been promised a prize, a reward, a gift. So, they followed the tunnels and then there it was, the dwarves so proud of it. They were so proud to give it to us." Her mood dropped, sank with the realization. "Until we ruined it. We did something so horrific that Mother Stone took it back."

Maybe it was the War of Three, when we didn't keep our word and protect those dwarven children that cost us Zadkhanûn. Mother Stone showed us mercy if that was all she did.

Legend said it could be given back and since living with the dwarves; she'd heard in more detail it would be given back to Mother Stone's children when it was earned. When they proved worthy of it. Maybe

she'd live to see it.

Or maybe it was bad to think such things. After all, wasn't her mother's obsession with such a thing the reason for all this mess in the first place?

"Okay." *Breathe in, breathe out*. "Legend of Lady Sauli. First dwarf to make a city under the water. Made of amber and gold."

Down a long and slender hall. She welcomed the tightness; gave an imitation of the tunnels back with Friga, Tyr, and the others. "Lord Drua, the first leader of the Dwarven People. Back when there was one city, before they branched off into smaller clans."

Passing a long dining hall. "Lady Disa discovered white fire."

As she rounded a new corner, she silenced her tongue, reciting the old story of love between sea and sky was reassuring but better to keep it to the mind right now.

Making her way down yet another empty hall, her ears caught a faint echo. Like when she spoke aloud to the cavern and it whispered back at her. A heartbeat behind her steps was another. Faint and so hard to make out, she wondered if it was just her mind attempting to fill in silence with anything.

Leaving the tighter corridors behind meant the palace opened into wide, domineering space. The wide openness of the rooms made her tremble and she longed for the closed in. Less space for people to sneak up. More comfort and warmth. A sense of…something.

Familiarity? It felt different and more deep than that but the word escaped her tongue.

Another sound. Tap? No, heavier.

Another.

Hand on her blade in her belt, she waited.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Faster. Closer.

Tightening her grip, she slid the blade out, just a fraction of an inch. The sound of the blade scraping the sheath thundered and she waited.

The steps kept coming.

Pulling the blade out entirely, she spun around and yelled when a familiar face gazed back at her. Older, worn, but very much alive.

Her blade stopped an inch from his throat.

"Lance?"



"How long?"

"Since before we went to visit your kingdom. It's just gotten worse since then. When I heard your kingdom had fallen, well, let's just say it broke my heart."

She shifted her eyes, giving him a sideways glance. She'd yet to remove her hand from her belt. As a precaution, she had moved it from the hilt, but she refused to go any further from her source of protection.

"So, how much in control were you when you visited?"

Lance sighed, red coloring his face but in a splotched pattern. "Enough to listen but not command." If regret was tangible, it was glossed all over his face. "If I had the ability, I would have done anything I could have."

Hard to judge if that was to be believed or not. She would have thought him at least fifty, if she were wagering guesses. His blond hair had thinned and she could see most of the scalp. Eyes shrunken in, so much like Tim's had been. Dive in to reach the color and come up short. Were all her people like this too? Hard to imagine Emery—already so shrunken with grief—crumbling anymore and the prospect sickened her.

But his eyes did not change.

Little muscle wrapped about Lance's limbs. She could see the individual bones in his fingers, in his legs, in his arms. Biceps were like toothpicks. It was a good thing she had not been a violent intruder; she could have broken him into pieces without breaking a sweat.

"Where are the others?"

Lance stumbled, blanched in horror. At first, she wondered if he would even answer her at all. A spell of sorts had drifted over him and he gazed ahead, looking for something that wasn't there and yet he could see. A familiar feeling. Part of her loathed she had to bring such a thing up but the rest of her protested she had to. After all, having a few survivors might be a thing worthy of note but one?

One in an entire palace?

And out of all the people to keep alive, why the Prince? Why the heir?

"I…haven't seen anyone for a long time. Longer than I wish to count."

"Where did they all go?" She grabbed his arm.

Lance yelled out in pain, eliciting a yelp from her. There was a dreadful sound, nearly like a crack. Releasing his arm, she took a step back, horrified.

Painting his forearm in the shape of her fingers, low blue bruises appeared under her grip.

"Oh, Mother Stone, I…"

"It's…it's fine." Lance stared at her, confusion and awe illuminating his face. "How did you get so strong?"

It's not that I'm strong. You're fragile as glass. As crumbling slate…

"Lance, what's happened to you?"

"I've been surviving how I can. I assume you saw the fields?"

Nodding, she followed him. The fields had been her first clue. Whereas her own Kingdom was dying, scarcely clinging to life, there'd been nothing in the fields here. Not even the skeletons of trees. Just dust and dirt.

In truth, finding anything alive had been a surprise.

"They've been like that for a time, and without the courts, I have been unsuccessful at reaching another kingdom for aid."

"When did the courts disappear?"

"They went last, a year ago. I thought for certain they had left and gone to seek aid. I thought I would be saved. For a few months, I lived on that. After …well, there's very little for sustenance here."

"You should have left. Sought out somewhere else."

"Easy to say. But where do I find it when I have no idea where to go?"

She eyed him. "You weren't taught the lands around your kingdom?"

"I…was. I have never been a very good student at such things. I wish now I had listened more." He eyed her, seeming to settle on the obvious question he had forgone asking. "What are you doing here, Princess Ember?"

"Looking for a Fae."

"She did not return from your—"

"No, not her. Unfortunately, she's still having her fun with my kingdom. I'm looking for her partner."

"By all the Gods, there's another one?"

"Apparently."

Prince Lance struggled against a large door, straining under its weight.

Ember pushed it forward with her left hand and it moved without issue.

Coughing to cover his embarrassment, Lance thanked her and walked inward.

It was a little room, not much of anything to be frank. It must have been a servant's quarters once. A small cot of a bed, and what looked like empty barrels and sacks. Small torches giving an eerie glow to the abandoned parcels. The remains of belongings those who had vanished left behind.

In fact, the large tapestry, woven of silver and green, settled on the wall, depicting the moon's multiple phases, was nearly all the color in the room. It draped down, framed between two stone pillars in front of the only small window, the light flowing through the colors, an imitation of life.

At the very top, nearly pushing out the barrier of the edge of the cloth, sharp twin stars of silver and green loomed over her, a silent but watchful eye.

"You've been living here?"

"If you'd call this living, yes. Occasionally, I will feel the spirit of Mother or Father and I admit I'm reluctant to leave it."

"Spirit? They've died?"

"Of course. Do you think I would be here if they hadn't?"

Dumb question. If knights are slaughtering farmers in my kingdom then…

"Well, I expected to see more than just one person here. Especially you. I would have thought you would have been the first person they went for. When did everything fall apart?"

"I've lost track. After we returned back from your kingdom, things were good, or as well as one can have things when your own will is imprisoned. I'm so glad you were able to break free of it. It's a shame your father fell to it."

Prickles began on the back of her neck. Traveling down her spine, she turned from her exploration of the room to look at him. "How did you know about that?"

"Pardon?"

"My father. Me being under the Fae's control. That certainly didn't happen when you were in the room and Alyssum doesn't seem the type to be blabbing that type of information. So, how did you know?"

"I…assumed it had taken a similar course to how it occurred here and…"

"Except my people didn't vanish. They died. They're still dying. And I thought the last of your court disappeared only a year ago. So, why would it make sense you thought that was routine?"

She did draw her blade and pointed it forward, the sword-edge singing its threat. Not quite at his throat but close enough it would take very little effort to close the distance.

The flash of his breathing didn't reflect in the metal.

"Who are you? And where is Lance?"

"I am…"

"No human could survive a year on this." She gestured around her with her free arm. "Not even a stick like Lance. So cut the lies. Who are you? I want to talk to the real Lance."

"Lance is right here."

It wasn't Lance's voice.

Darker, older. Not like Alyssum's. This one was crackling, like the popping of wood in a fire. Masculine but not a heavy deep tone. Yet, as she watched, the blond hair and skin bubbled, like stew on a hearth. Pasty and white, it brightened to orange and like a candle worn down, melted away.

"Lance is right here."

Bones, clean and worn and likely years old, stared back at her. Empty of eyes and flesh, a walking collection of death that opened a mouth snapping when it moved. For a brief moment, it seemed to hover, half suspended before falling, tumbling to a pile where legs and arms and fingers and toes disconnected, severed, not linked at all.

The skull bounced and rolled to land at her feet and the mouth cackled one last time. "What's left of him anyway."

He came out of the air before her, where the skeleton had been moving, walking and talking. Tall, with deep topaz skin and hair of brilliant green shimmering amid the small room as it flowed around him, snakes trying to escape a fire.

Much like Alyssum, he had light painted on him.

"I have to confess it's a relief to not have to wear that skin anymore." Shaking his head as if he had just emerged from a swim in the creek, the Fae held out his hand, as if they were best friends meeting for a luncheon. "Raulin, at your service."

"Stay back!" Taking a step or two backward while trying to get the layout of the room, she drifted from one side to the other, never moving her eyes from him. His eyes were amber, too rich a color for so horrible a creature.

"Stay back? You came into my home. I was just being a good host."

"It's not your home. None of this is yours."

"Well, I can't say it's the former owners either." Drifting upward, he

reclined in the air as if relaxing in a chair. “Hard to call much ownership to something when you’re cold and dead.”

“You killed them? All of them?”

“Well, I find it terribly rude to brag about my achievements. Especially when one can see them quite readily for themselves. Now, if I may, young Princess, what are you doing here and so oddly dressed. Hardly the attire I’d expect of royalty.”

She looked down, almost without meaning to. Simple tunic dress, boots—

The blow came not long after, before she even had a chance to really look up. Thankfully, she dropped to her knees to avoid the full force to the face. The dark fire still burned and singed the edges of her hair, something causing her no small amount of anger.

So similar to the burst of magic that had almost taken her life during her escapades back home.

Her hand fell to the tapestry for support as she pulled herself upright.

“Get away!”

A gust of wind sent her flying, careening into the far wall, her head singing as it collided with stone. Whiteness took her vision for a moment but a moment was all the Fae needed. Before her sight cleared enough to lift her blade, lightning entered her arm.

Well, it was a blade actually.

Screeching out, though not for lack of trying to withstand it, her other hand immediately went to brace the wound.

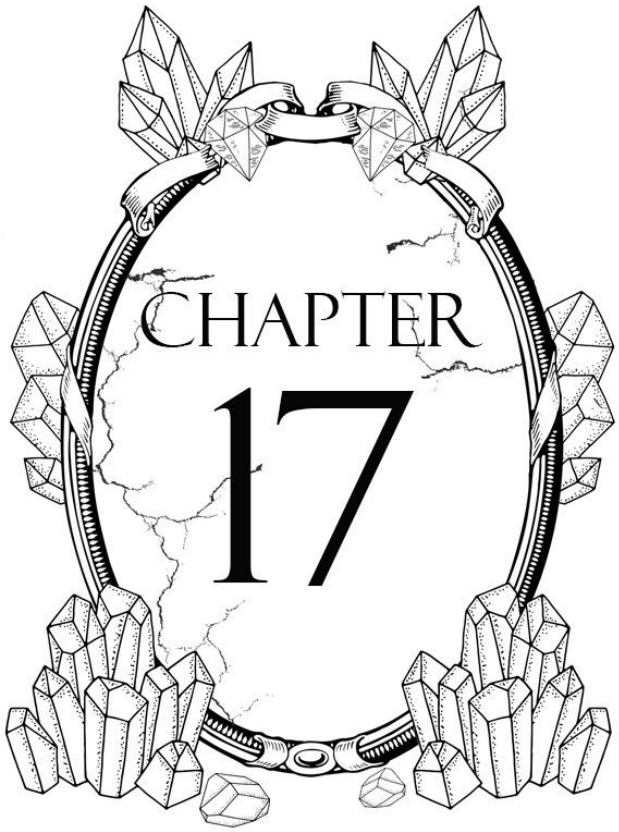
The tip of a set of nails caressed her neck.

“Now, if you’re done with—”

Air suddenly erupted from the Fae’s mouth, along with spit and grime, spilling all over Ember’s face. A moment following, the tip of an iron spear cut its way through the creature’s neck, just below the chin.

Coming up from behind, the bite of the first fire itself alive in her eyes, Friga made her demand clear with an extra thrust of spear.

“Take your fucking hands off my little girl.”



"I'd mind my movement if I were you."

The Fae in question gasped, hands grasping hold of the iron shaft in their neck. A light trickle of blue and green trailed around the wound. Whatever Fae had in place of blood, no doubt.

"Now, I'll tell you once more. Remove your blade from my girl's arm."

Nervous and with a trembling hand, the Fae opened his palm and the sharp, protruding metal pulled from Ember's upper shoulder, drawing a cry of pain from her as it did so.

"Better?"

"Better." Friga shifted her weapon, but made no move to pull it away.

"Ember?"

The soft voice at her side was welcomed and she all but collapsed into

him. “Tyr.” His name rolled from her lips with exhaustion.

He lifted his shirt off and wrapped it around her wound, pulling it as tight as he could. Probably a little tighter than he had to but better to cover too much than not enough.

“Can you stand?”

Nodding to his inquiry, Ember took his hand as he pulled her to her feet. Not a foot away from her was the large tapestry, but with the magic all but glistening from it. In a dark room, it would have served the purpose of a thousand lanterns.

“Now.” Friga’s tone was cold. “Mind if we collect a little information from you, my dear?” The false nicety in her voice was almost more disturbing than the demand she’d made with her weapon’s introduction.

“I am Fae, Dwarf.” The Fae snarled.

“Dwarrow.” Ember found herself saying. Even Tyr looked at her, baffled by her insistence at correcting the creature’s terminology.

Their Fae prisoner snorted. “Really? On top of being your prisoner, you’re going to correct my grammar, too?”

“Considering it involves the person currently sticking a blade in you, I’d pay her as much respect as I could.”

Friga gave a half tilt of the head, a silent ‘well,’ formed on her lips.

“Dwarrow.” The Fae said again, contempt dripping from every syllable. “I am Fae—”

“We’ve established that.” Ember folded her arms, winced when she got half way and lowered them again.

Friga lifted her head, locked eyes with the girl. “Ember. For now? Mouth, shut.”

“Yes, Friga.”

“I am Fae,” the creature said, for the third time. “Many things you can do to me but kill me? I doubt even you dwarves have figured it out.”

“No, you’re right on that account.” Dangerous intent was woven into Friga’s every word. “But death isn’t exactly the end all people make it out to be.” Pressing forward, her iron shaft pushed deeper into the flesh of the neck.

“I can break as well as make metal. A nice piece of dwarven metal inside you would be quite enough to render you pretty weak and pathetic. Certainly long enough for me to drag you back to my forge fire.”

Ember laid her hand on Tyr’s shoulder. She had seen Friga angry before, sometimes at her, sometimes at others, but never to this extent. This sounded cruel, malicious.

She was simultaneously intrigued and terrified.

"Fae need time to heal themselves. Hard to heal yourself when you're being roasted." Friga leaned over, looking up at the Fae who shrank his height as if afraid of offending her. "I think I could keep a blue or white flame going quite long enough for you to wish I had been able to kill you."

Ember exchanged a look to Tyr, the dwarven term '*rukun*' spoken barely under her breath. It seemed an appropriate statement—is such a thing morally allowable? Tyr shrugged in response and held a palm over his mouth, indicating silence. Nodding agreement, she said nothing else.

The Fae had plenty to say. "You wouldn't. Too much morality in your group. Especially after all those poor children died…" He grinned. "Such a damn pity. You don't like killing."

Taking out her hammer, Friga hit the edge of the spear head, just enough to bend backward, to dig it into the flesh more, curling into the skin. "We hate people hurting our children even more and you did more than a little to my Black Star. So, make your choice—talk or not?"

She hit it again. A low crack appeared.

"Stop! Stop, you crazy dwarrow, stop!"

"Oh, you feel like talkin' now?"

"Yes, yes, just put your hammer down!"

Friga gave it a low jolt for good measure, but did so. "Now, about the Fae Alyssum. You work for her?"

"Used to. Off and on."

"Is that why you're here?"

"It was a gift once all the humans were gone."

"And the tapestry?" Tyr lifted it and brought it over. "Anything special about it?"

"Holds the kingdom magic together."

"But…no effect on you?" Defeat soaked Ember's voice.

"Hurts a lot. Lots of magic in that thing. I always know what's happening to it—"

"So, this Alyssum has one, too." Friga stated. "Doesn't she?"

"Every Fae does." The syllables dragged across the air, reluctance drowning them to a mere crawl. More proof than anything else it was truth.

"So, we get rid of that thing and the spell on the castle goes away?" Ember nearly asked more but Tyr jabbed her in the leg, an unspoken reminder to be cautious. After nearly losing her neck, she took heed to it.

"Yes. Won't do anything about any magic she's already gathered."

Here, he smiled, a not friendly smile. “Humans, animals, land. Not much magic in them so the magic takes what it can.”

So that was it. That was why everything was dying. It was being, quite literally, eaten alive.

“But like I’m sure you know…can’t kill a Fae.”

“So, we’ll need to make living more of a hell for her than death as long as she remains there.” Tyr twirled his own hammer.

“And she has to recharge eventually.” Friga lowered her staff and deliberately slowly, she pulled it out, inch by inch. “Even magic can be burned to near zero, can’t it?”

“Everything has limits.”

“Good.” Friga frowned. “Much as I’d like to drag you along and make you help us point out everything, I barely trust what’s coming out of your mouth now.”

With a final yank, the Fae fell, winced and tried to heal his wound.

“Ember?”

The young woman blinked and Friga gave a nod toward the wall where one of the bright torches still gleamed with heat.

It took a moment for her to make a realization. “Gladly.”

“Wait!” The Fae cursed as Ember removed the torch, taking step by step to Tyr who held the tapestry high and wide. “I told you what you wanted to know!”

“I’m aware.” Friga gave a nod to the two younger folk. “I never said I wouldn’t break your magic if you told me.”

With that, under a wave of the torch, Ember let the flames lick the tapestry and that was all it took for a combustion force of flame, smoke, and heat. The fragile threads all but disintegrated and the Fae screeched, his face turning all kinds of colors.

But he was also quick to fade away and it was obvious why.

As soon as the smoke had faded, the palace lurched, the stone twisted and one by one, crumbled. The window panes shattered into liquid water, chandeliers faded from gold to twisted branches and the walls themselves clattered into slate and crumbled stone.

“Move!”



“I’M SORRY, FRIGA.” Wincing as the applied ointment worked its magic on the wound, the boat shifted, a smooth glide as water moved and divided.

“I know you are. You've never been a cruel girl.” Wrapping the cloth tight and firm around the gash, Ember clenched her teeth as Friga gave a halfhearted tug to her hair. “May the Stone Mother give you a child half as stubborn for recompense.”

Head bowed, Ember said. “I got the answers we needed.”

“Aye, I suppose so. But what if Tyr and I hadn’t decided to follow after you? Where would you have been then?”

“Well—”

“Dead.” Tyr had been silent since their silent trek back towards the underground tunnels. Now, as he pushed the boat forward, his voice sparked with combustion and flame. “You’d have been dead, Ember.”

Hearing caustic words from Tyr’s lips was an odd occasion and Ember’s spirit crumbled beneath it. With Friga in one ear and now Tyr in the other, it was hard to displace the sickening feeling in her gut.

“Dead! Gone! And all you would have to show for it would be giving that bastard a little more juice! How do you think me or Friga or Brother-of-my-Father would have felt having to bring home your corpse?”

“I didn’t think—”

“Exactly. You didn’t think!”

He went quiet and for more than half the journey down the river, no one said anything. Watching the water, Ember let her finger shift through it, the coolness a relief.

It was like she was back, fleeing the palace after her father’s death. Yet, not the same at all. She’d been so full of sadness and this was a different kind of sadness. Not just a desire for things to be different, but a desire that she had *chosen* different paths to *make* things different.

What had she done?

Tyr rarely got angry. She could count the number of times on one hand. Yet, here he was, back stiff, hair pulled tight and close to his head and each stroke in the water more forceful than necessary.

“I just wanted to get answers—”

“Answers you could have gotten safer if you bothered to stop for half a heartbeat!”

“I wanted—”

“We know.” Tyr’s oar struck the water with force and intent. “You wanted it now. You needed answers now. We’re damn monsters for keeping you from them, right?”

"I never said—"

"Didn't need to. Usually when people get angry at you for trying to help them, it's something I just assume."

"I never said you were monsters and you know that! Me getting angry doesn't mean—"

"It means you don't bother to think about anything except what *you* need!"

"It's not for me, Tyr!" Her voice heightened and she stood, to her full height. "It's for my—"

"Sit down!" Yanked down by Friga, Ember gave a low cry as the rock of the boat tilted and moved and Tyr slammed his oar into the ground to steady it.

"See? Again! Do you stop to think at all, Ember? For once?"

Friga lifted her eyes. "Tyr, that's enough."

"Obviously not. We've been telling her this for years and she still does it! All we've tried to do is help her and she acts like we just want to keep her a prisoner."

"Now, you're being silly." The older dwarrow remarked. "She made a mistake, a large one and yes, she's made similar ones in the past. Like you have as well. A mistake is a mistake. But you need to stop before your tongue outpaces your heart."

Growling, a frightening sound amid the dark, Tyr turned his attention back to the river. He said nothing, lifted the oar, and kept rowing.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Ember shifted and looked to Friga who had turned her attention away from her and back forward. "Friga?"

"Tyr speaks too harshly because his heart aches, but he doesn't speak untruths." She shifted and looked at the young woman. Pausing, she drew in a breath before she spoke. "Ember, what more do we need to do to convince you that you are not in a battle alone?"

Voice tight, Ember looked at her and for one moment: there was not her, nor Tyr, nor even the river. If anything, all she saw and heard were the words and screams from so long ago. The look on Henriette's face. The sound of rushing fire. The shadow mask on her father.

"I…" She found herself after a moment or two. "I'm just doing what I have to do. You've already done so much for me, all of you. I can't very well ask you to die for me too. If anyone is going to die for this, it should be me." Shaking her head, she turned to look at Tyr but he refused to meet her eyes. "If anyone is going to die, it won't be you."

"Love doesn't work like that, my girl."

While she didn't turn to face her, Ember did inquire. "Why do you say that?"

"Love is complicated. Sometimes you want nothing more than to wrap your arms around them and hold them close, but they pull and protest and to make them happy, you let them go. Sometimes you want to scream and yell at them to silence the war in your own heart."

Ember kept quiet.

"The worst one is when you want to help them, you know what they need to do to ease their own pain but they won't let you." Friga looked at her. "When that happens, all you can do is be patient, offer what you can and hope one day, they will come to understand. Words are powerful, little Black Star. We give them power and we take them away. But we also carry power by what we choose not to say or do."

With that, she went silent and turned her eyes back to the water ahead.

Ember wrapped her arms about her legs and hugged them tight into her chest.

In her quest to try and save her human people, she was hurting her dwarven people at the same time.

It wasn't something she'd pondered very much, at least not consciously. She felt welcomed, she felt at peace, but until she'd walked through Gralcimm, she'd not really put her finger on it.

Before, she would have felt right at home in a vast palace like Gralcimm. For all her dislike of court politics, she did understand court and those things were familiar. The rich walls, the rugs, the lighting, all of it.

Not anymore. She'd felt all but naked in those halls, a strong desire for another to be tight around her. The comfort of the tunnels. The sound of hard work. The chatter of people. The jests exchanged in friendly banter.

All this she had.

She loathed leaving it, faced with such a prospect, a reminder of what the castle life had been, her spirit ached.

Yet, was that not what she would do to save her people?

She didn't want it to be that way.

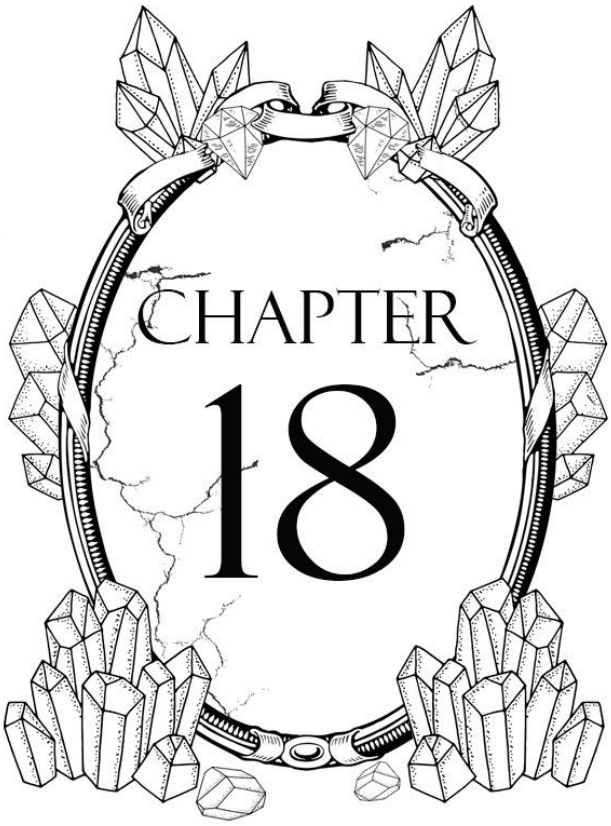
And Tyr, she did not want to leave him, nor Friga. She traced the blue star she still kept around her neck and the courtship braid she wore with pride. The idea of undoing that braid sickened her to the core.

She had her answers now. A way or at least the best option there was to take back control of her kingdom and free her people.

Why now did she suddenly feel so afraid?

All she knew was it had nothing to do with facing her mother, confronting the Fae, or even what she might find.

It was what she might lose.



Except for the occasional rumble of distant thunder, the sky was quiet. The soft patter of rain on soil and rock soothed Ember's troubled spirit.

She gazed upward at the clouds, closing her eyes and letting the water paint her face. Drops stuck to her eyelashes and she relished the cold. Any colder and it may have become sleet or snow. Maybe that would have been even better.

"Don't see the fuss about rain."

Opening her eyes, she turned and balked.

He came.

Tyr stood by her side, arms wrapped tight around his body as the falling water drenched his hair and beard. He looked like a half-drowned cat, scowl and all.

She shouldn't have laughed; she knew that much but she couldn't help it. His pout was always so adorable.

"Tyr, you hate the rain. Why are you out in it?" She shifted to face him. "I can handle myself."

Please don't leave.

She let him grasp her hand, wet and cold, and lay his warm lips to the top. "Cause my half-drowned self got you to laugh. I'll tolerate it."

Sinking to her knees so she was more at his level, her hands went to his shoulders. "Tyr, I'm sorry. About…everything. I was angry and frustrated and sad and I felt so helpless, like I had to do something I didn't even think about anyone else." The realization weighed down on her heart. "I was being selfish, not waiting, not listening. Not thinking."

Tyr shook his head. "I was mad at you, not gonna lie. I don't want anything to happen to you Ember and all I wanted was for you to understand. Me and Friga and all the others too. What if Friga had gotten there a second later, a half second later? I'd have been donning grieving beads and soaking your ashes. I'd have had to add a flower for you to the Memory Lake."

"I never wanted that. I shouldn't have…" Sighing, she said, "I think I was so focused on my people back home …I forgot about my people here. Wish I had a better reason but I don't. I'm sorry."

"Forgave you a long time ago, Ember. But, it does feel good to hear you say it. I know you never want to hurt me or Friga or any of the others. But can't say I've never hurt anyone before so…"

His hair, loosened by the rain and wind, drooped, curls of white slapping against his nose, freed from his braids.

"Ember, I don't know why you take this burden on yourself. You aren't at fault for any of this. No matter what that bitch of a mother would have you believe. She doesn't deserve that title."

"Tyr…"

"No. She doesn't. She never has. And somehow she's still got a grip on your heart." His hands grasped her tight on the cheeks, but there was only gentleness in his touch. "You owe her nothing, Ember. Nothing."

The music of his words tickled her ears, seeped into her mind.

"I don't care what anyone else has said. You trust me, right?"

"Yes." No hesitation. No delay. No reason to. "More than anyone."

"Then trust me when I say this:—you've a right to be angry. You've a right to be furious. You've a right to be sad and hurt and lost. But don't waste all your energy chasing something…someone that's never going to give you what you seek. You want a mother. But that woman is not a

mother."

Her stomach twisted. Turned. Her heart beat and swelled, but not from denial. Not like before. Not like the past five years where she used to dream about venturing home and delivering her people by appealing to some sweet woman inside the Queen. No. This was a different kind of pain.

"I wish I was wrong." Tyr's voice cracked, trembled. "Worst thing is—people that are cruel to us often get a vice grip on our heart and mind. And we will hurt ourselves *for* them until we realize the lie we're believing."

Ember nodded, hard and solid. "It's hard. It's not that I want to believe it. I don't. Who wants to believe they've let themselves be lied to all their lives? But I'm tired." She inhaled, wincing at the pain and effort even that took. "I'm tired, Tyr."

Reality hurt. Realizing truths, no matter how vital they were, hurt.

"Be angry, Ember. Be tired, be exhausted, be sad. Why do you act like it's some horrendous vice? The way she treated you was wrong. It was *her* fault, not yours. You don't owe her anything. Just like the blade you carry owes nothing to the ore it was drawn from. It's its own creation, master of its own fate." He fumbled, as if looking for the right words. "There's a reason we only take our inner name, our soul-name, when we take our marks. Because we become it. We aren't born into it. We create it. Just like you created you. Your mother had nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with that. The creative, snarky, clever, loving person you are. That's all you."

"Tyr…"

"And it's not right what you had to endure. Be sad about what you lost. Be tired that you have to deal with it now. Be angry at how you were treated. Own it. Own all of it."

It was almost easier not to. So tempting, it was, to just ignore the truth and continue living her little lie of hope. Hope that her mother was not the person she was. Hope that there was a version of her mother that loved her as she was. Hope that she was more than a pawn and tool for the woman.

Feeling that sadness, that despair. If she'd been alone, she was fairly certain the ground would have found her.

But she wasn't alone.

Head bowed, she finally looked at him, lost herself in the low illumination from his silvery-white skin. Being lost amid its soft glow was a balm. Weak and tired as she was, he wasn't. He was the mountain

given flesh form, the unrelenting hardness of diamond.

With eyes so warm flame withdrew in shame.

The loose hairs tossed about in the windy rain, tangling and tightening.

Reaching to tuck the nearest strand back into the braid, Ember stopped, withdrawing. Five years among dwarves and she still instinctively reached forward, fingers outstretched to run them through hair. Her father had done so as a comfort and her body nearly acted on its own to do the same. And the way Friga's touch always poured comfort into her heart.

While she was getting better at remembering hair was a sacred thing to dwarves, she still slipped occasionally. Always more often with Tyr.

This time when he caught her wrist, it wasn't to gently push her hand away.

He held it, gentle and soft, between his fingers.

"Sorry," her voice came out with no hesitation. "You'd think by now I'd remember—"

"No," he said, rushing through the words as if afraid they'd tie up his tongue. Looking up at her, he swallowed, finger twisted about his Courtship Braid. He clutched it, as if life itself depended on it. "I...you...I give you my consent to touch my hair."

Ember stood there, hand frozen in his for far longer than what was socially appropriate. "You mean it?" Her voice was small, humbled.

"I asked you if you trusted me. Well, I trust you."

She bowed briefly, silent thanks to such belief. Trust was not to be thrown around haphazardly. If a dwarf offered trust, it was to be valued and treasured.

Treasure it, she would.

Her hands wove through his long, white, locks and the strands hugged her fingers, dropping away reluctantly. Oh, could she let them linger until the mountains blew into the sea? Connection, belonging, a sense that even if the world were to collapse around her, her heart and spirit would endure so long as he were with her, Ember drowned in the reassurance.

Her breath escaped with an airy gasp.

After a moment, she withdrew and sat, her slacks soaking in the rain. Yet, the cold did not penetrate her skin. Tyr was a balm against the icy winds and she never wanted him to leave. She rubbed one of his braids, a silent plea.

"If I could undo it." Ember didn't finish and she didn't have to.

Tyr took hold her hand and ran his fingers up to rest just by her hair line.

When she gave a nod, he let them drift inward, pulling and gently caressing.

"Don't dwell on what you did or didn't do. After all, you can't undo a quench. Right?"

"Right."

"Just try to remember we want to help you but you have to let us."

Breathing out, Ember nodded. "I'll try. Guess I haven't improved as much as I thought."

"You have." Stroking her left ear, tracing the contours of it, he chuckled a little at the wet mess they both had become. "Better than before. Just need to work on it a little more."

Shaking her head, sending flares of wet water spurting here and there, Ember said. "I asked Friga once what she thought about me going back to take the kingdom. Her face got so clouded, like I was taking away her forge and hammer. I felt bad I ever asked. Then she told me I was more lightning than thunder. I was chaotic, unpredictable."

"No lie in it."

"No and I told her I understood. I was trying to save their lives, nothing else. Never was good at politics. Not much ruler material."

"That's silly. Why do you have to be good at politics to be a good ruler?"

"Well, lots of rules in the court."

"So, change the rules. Rule it like you want to. I don't think her calling you lightning was an insult, Ember. It sounds like a compliment to me."

"Chaotic is a compliment?"

"Can be. I've also seen lightning split a mountain peak. It gets things *done*."

A warm smile took her face, a contrast to the starlight, clouds, and raindrops. "You think so? This lightning seems to get herself in a jam. Constantly."

Grinning, Tyr stroked a hair from her forehead. "Well, good thing lightning rarely strikes by itself. It always has thunder."

Leaning back, she looked up at him. With her sitting and him standing, he was taller than her for once. Despite the emotions twisting her stomach, his presence cooled the fire.

Leaning over, he pressed his forehead on hers. "It'll be all right. I dunno how it'll be all right, but it will."

Ember let his words wash over her. With everything stacked against them, she still found she believed him. “I hope it is. The world hasn’t exactly been kind to either of us. Your people, they deserve better than what they got.”

“And you deserved better than what you got.”

Ember bit her lower lip, sank her fingers into the mud at her feet, and twisted it into various shapes. “Maybe that’s why I just wanted to fix this all myself. Because it’s not right you all have to be dragged into it. It had nothing to do with you and you lost things, too.”

Tyr shook his head. “Life sucks sometimes. It’s not fair. I wish it was. If I had my way, you’d be living in all the luxury in the world.” He went quiet, just stood, as if guarding her from the frantic winds of the oncoming storm. “I love you, you know.”

Ember shifted, gazed upwards. From this angle, with the moonlight and the rain, he looked like a God himself. As if someone had taken the moonlight and given it a solid form, bathed in an otherworldly glow. There was a power to him she was envious of. Not so much raw strength though he certainly had no failing in that. Rather, there was a spiritual energy to him, the contents of his heart were painted into his skin. That simple statement carried all the weight of the sky, the oceans, and the earth combined.

He looked down at her; she must have been gawking like a fool because he grabbed at his braids and twisted back and forth on his feet. He looked adorable when nervous and yet he looked no less mature and powerful. “I know it’s foolish. A human Princess and a Dwarven blacksmith. But my heart has never paid much attention to what my head says.”

Reaching up, Ember gently pulled him down so he flopped to the ground next to her. She reached out and rested her hands on his face, enjoying the rough texture of his beard against her fingers. “I love you, Tyr. I think I have for years. I mean, really loved you. I’ve just been… well, I didn’t think to…” Frustrated at her mouth’s inability to conform to her feelings effectively, she groaned. “I wanted to and didn’t know how.”

He nodded. “I know it has. And I understand, I—”

She leaned in, a breath away from his. “If I can. I’d like to show you more than tell you.”

“Always a girl of action. Love that.”

She laid her lips on his, a soft kiss, cautious yet daring. Kissing was much more a human thing than a dwarven thing but she lost herself in

his scent, in the soft caress of his hair in her fingers, in the warmth that flooded her body, as if his spirit was dancing with hers.

With a cheeky grin, she brushed a stray hair from her face, held up her hands—calloused as his now from time in the forge. "I think we can both handle anything thrown our way." For a moment, the fear and tension bled back into her eyes. "Maybe you're right. Maybe the secret to all this isn't to save and give back my people what they had before. The old world was rotten. I don't like the world that said I shouldn't be with you."

Twisting his blacksmith hammer in his hand as if it were the weapon of the Gods themselves, he said. "And if the world won't change then I'll burn down this world and build you a new one from its ashes."

Again—she believed him.

"It's time to finally do something, Tyr. I've been waiting for this chance. I know I've been obnoxious with how much I talk about it. It never leaves my mind." Hands trembling, Ember let herself slump, hiding her face. "And here I am, like some kind of scared kitten."

Tyr nodded, no statement, the cool patter of the rain shattering the silence with grace. For a moment, he let her tremble and babble to herself. Never speak too soon, after all. Last thing he wanted was anyone to think their expression of emotion was a bad thing.

When he'd waited as long as he could stand, he said, "*Cara-orea.*"

She turned, her hair sticking to her cheeks. "*Cara-ores*?" She must have sounded like a parrot.

A firm nod and he took her hands. "*Cara-orea.*"

Cara-orea—soul eye. A very special Dwarven belief. The mother Goddess kissed each one, be it at creation or in the womb and it was through her kiss they gained the soul-eye. The ability to link to one another. To share in each other's joy by touching souls. Or—

"Lend me some of your fear, Firefly." Her nickname always flowed like molten silver from his tongue. Nicknames held power in dwarven culture. To give someone a nickname was to lend them a piece of the heart. It was why given names were almost less common than chosen ones.

Tyr…he used this one so rarely, which only made her long to hear it more. "Let me take some of the burden."

She sat there, silent and still before giving a low and stiffened nod. "*Cara-orea, salvas*."

Tyr leaned over and she leaned up, letting their foreheads brush and rest together. "*Salvas,*" he said aloud. The command for 'alleviate,

release, unburden.'

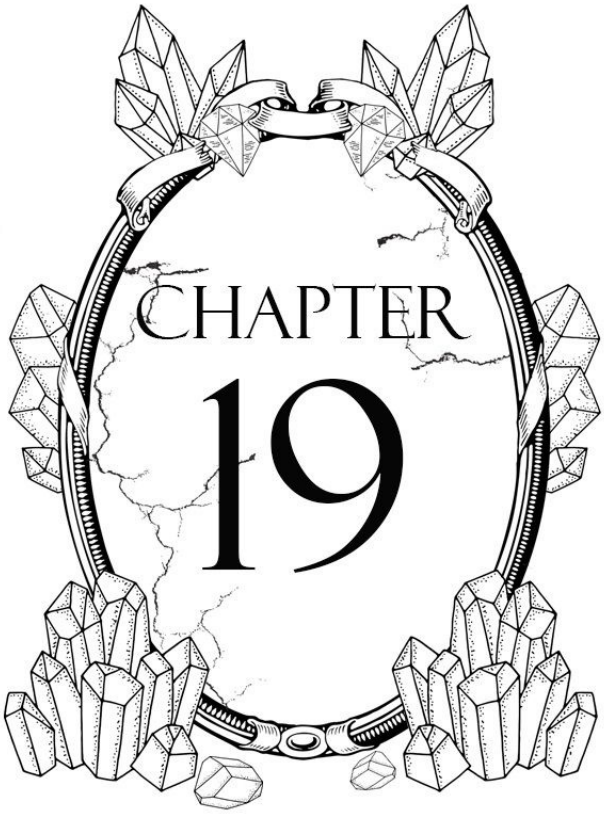
She wasn't a dwarf. True, she had done the forehead touches before but that was always merely a cultural symbol more than active engagement. But as she sat there, sharing the same breath, resting her head against his, strength came back to her. Not just physical but mental, emotional. The fear did not flee, but it dulled, grew weak in comparison.

Maybe she was more dwarf than she thought.

She wasn't alone.

And she never wanted to be alone again.

"Tyr. I want to take my dwarven marks."



Pulling her pins out, she set them, one by one on the side table. Her hair fell in wavy and crimped clumps, a side effect of near constant braiding. She could feel it bounce as she stood, nearly piling at her ankles.

"Tyr." She twisted her long hair, pulling it over her shoulder to fall over her front. "Can you undo my tunic?"

"Sure."

The light pinpricks as he made short work of her ties and buttons was a relief. Small and short as they were, the pressure into her back was a soothing reminder. Tyr's hard and callused fingertips helped her refocus.

This was what she wanted. This was what she needed.

"What are you going to do once you win back your kingdom?"

It was the question she knew everyone had asked to themselves but Tyr alone was bold enough to voice it. In truth, she was grateful he was

going to be so straightforward.

"I don't know." Admitting that was hard and settled like sour milk in her stomach. "I know I need to keep my people from being killed. I know I need to save what I can of the land." Sourness spread across her face. "If any of it can be saved. After what we found in Gralcimm, call me skeptical."

"Good. I am, too. Least your kingdom seems to still have people in it instead of…whatever that was."

She preferred not to think of it but it had spurred a choice in her. "I want to come home when this is over, Tyr."

"Home?"

"Home." She slipped out of her usual dark blue leather tunic dress and leggings, leaving herself bare before Tyr. "Home is here."

He made no comment. Just continued their conversation. One of the best things about dwarves. They put such emphasis on creativity, ingenuity, intelligence, and such inner traits that little if any thought was paid to the outer appearances, save the communication braids gave.

"I know Friga will be thrilled. It would leave an empty place for us all if you were gone. As it is, she says I keep trying to steal you away from her." He teased the blue sapphire beads sitting on the side table.

The next step. The promised beads.

He'd made them for her not too long ago and as was custom, gave them to her to hold until she had made her decision. The amount of time she spent on such a choice was hers and hers alone. Some took hours, some days, some months, some years. If she decided against it, all she need do is return them.

She hadn't.

Solid and firm in her pocket throughout the adventure, they'd rested and honestly she'd been unsure about how she felt about them. Or, rather, afraid to admit to herself what she felt about them because it was a reflection of how she felt about a lot of things, including her old home. The palace she'd been born in.

The prospect drained her heart now, because how could she have considered anything but accepting them.

And Tyr had waited.

"I don't intend on leaving her or you." Pure and exposed, her voice caught. "I need to save my people. They don't deserve what they're enduring, the ones that have survived. But…I don't want to leave you all either."

Tyr approached her, gently clasped her hand. "So don't."

Heaving a sigh, she nodded. “I don’t want to. But I have to offer them somewhere to go.”

With a shrug, the dwarf said. “So bring them here.”

Laughter erupted from her throat. “Oh, I’m sure the Council would *love* that.”

“They’re all starting to retire anyway. Bunch of old geezers that don’t like to listen. New ones’ll be taking their place and they all like you. Gems and facets, even most of the Council like you, they just don’t like to admit it.”

“Well, what about the rest of the city? They’ve just gotten used to me. Now you want me to bring in a whole bunch of humans?”

“Cold water method. Adjust because you have to.” Grinning, he added. “Besides. Before you were just Ember from the human palace. You’re a sister now. Maybe they don’t like humans, but they’ll put up with it for a sister.” He added. “If Friga can claim family to you, then you can certainly claim family to your people.”

Eyes serious and heavy, Tyr reached up, gently brushing aside her hair. “And I would claim *morine* for every single one of them. For you.”

“You’d risk Mother Stone’s anger if you overuse it.”

“Only if it’s insincere. It’s not. If they’re dear to you, they’re dear to me.” He leaned forward and Ember knelt to meet his forehead with her own. “And if that fails, I’ll take a message from my ancestors.”

“What message is that?”

Waving his arm around the area surrounding them, Tyr smiled, clasping her hand tight. “This was once solid rock. If my ancestors could form and build a kingdom, brick by brick, chisel cut by chisel cut, then so can I.”

Before she could respond to his solemn vow, the door creaked open and Bofun’s head wove its way in. “They’re ready, if you are.”

Looking Ember directly in the eyes, he said. “Last chance. You’re sure?”

“More sure than I’ve been of anything.” Head high, she marched forward.

The doors opened on a small gathering. A collection of her most trusted faces and their families, four sacred fires on the ground and two above, and in the center of it all, a shallow pit doused in water so the mud bubbled up like a dirty swimming hole. Looming over it all, a carved chandelier of all kinds of colors hung, lightly swaying amid the energy of the room. It was hard to see how it was supported or if it merely was suspended, held there by a deeply focused Stone Sense.

Stone Sense remained apart from her so who was she to say such a feat was impossible?

Carved deeply into to the wall—no, more like the wall came out of the carving, was a dwarven figure with braids that came to the ground as stairs and hands spread wide, the upturned palms cradling two of the sacred fires. The colors of blue and white danced over the closed eyes of the carved figure, effectively creating a variation of cool and warm. The only place in the entire city where the Creator was given physical form.

Mother Stone dominated the entire room, with black fires forming a long aisle toward her shadow, where everyone was gathered and the pool waited.

At the head of it all was Friga, two of the "old geezer" Elders, including Yellow Elder, and Dwak, the dwarf had one job, giving everyone their milestone tattoos.

"Ember." Elder Dolan spoke, voice clear and echoing. "You stand here, your full self before us all and before Stone Mother. Why?"

"I wish to proclaim myself, in blood, flesh, and spirit as Dwarven. I wish…" Her voice stalled. This was what she wanted, she knew it in her bones, but her mind cursed her, called her a traitor, a betrayer, a daughter of the worst lot. Her stomach twisted, like she was doing something wrong. Tyr's hand gave hers a light squeeze. "I wish to cast off my mother's link to me."

Her knees shook. Her voice quivered. "I…need to cast off her link to me." Her mind raced, ran as a river crashed upon rocks. "Even if that makes me a horrible daughter, I…"

Friga stepped up to her side, slipped her hand into hers. "Sometimes the people we think we love the most are the ones that hurt us the most. They wear love as a false shawl, one they tease the warmth and security of against the storm of the world. Oh, the things we'll do to be wrapped in that feeling even knowing it to be brief and fleeting. It takes us a long time to realize the same cloak they use to pull us close, they tighten about our neck—a little tighter, a little harder each time until choking becomes so natural we know nothing else." She took Ember's hand and wove it into her own braids. "Realizing you do not deserve to be choked is not being a horrible daughter. It is realizing you deserve better."

Ember paused, rested a time in the comfort of Friga's touch. Kneeling, she all but collapsed her forehead on the older dwarrow's and the two stood there a long time.

Better.

Deserved better.

She deserved better. Tyr had said so. Friga said so. Each time a dwarf gave her a smile or a dwarrow laughed alongside her, was that not how things were supposed to be? The odd feeling she had discovered among her years here, she finally had a name for it.

It wasn't an emotion at all but rather a lack of one.

No fear.

No fear of judgement, no fear of punishment, no fear of being cast aside for not being just-so. The emotion her mother had poured into her every moment, she endured none of it here.

Because she deserved better.

Standing up, stretching herself tall, Ember repeated, this time with no shakiness to her tone. "I wish to cast off my mother's link to me."

The gathered dwarves slammed their feet in unison, six times, onto the stone floor.

"So it is known. Do you wish to link another in her place?"

"All of you." The words flowed easier than she imagined they would. "All of you." She'd had a long and prepared speech on importance, what each one meant to her, but it fell to ash in her mouth. "All of you."

"So it is known. Step forward, Ember, and enter the pool."

Into the muddied water she went, the oozing liquid coating her up to her knees. She sat, legs folded and at the nod from Friga laid down entirely, her hair seeping below her and her body following suit until her blinking eyes gazed up from the ceremonial pit.

"We are carved by the Stone Mother, from the earth, then water, and hardened by fire." Elder Dolan entered the pool himself, the mud coating his robes. He laid a hand on Ember's forehead. "And as we are carved, so we are forged. And we can be forged again. Thus into the Stone Mother's forge we commit you, Ember. May all previous life ties be burned away and when you emerge, you emerge new and whole."

Taking a breath, Ember held it and closed her eyes, letting the mud seep over her as Dolan pushed her head under, hand gentle and voice calm.

All the pain, all the previous failures—in this moment, the Stone Mother would remove it all.

The coolness ran over her, into every crevice and crack, through hair and skin. When the hand slipped under her neck and pulled her out, they wiped the mud from under her nostrils so she could breathe and then they were walking.

Temperature changed; suddenly hot and blazing. But it wasn't harsh. She kept her eyes closed until she felt the cracking as the mud dried

upon her skin. In chunks, it fell off, tumbling to the ground in slivers and flakes, leaving her skin lush, clean, and new underneath.

As the mud around her eyes gave way and she opened her eyes, she sat to her knees and two dwarves—Kva and Tyr—doused her in lukewarm water, flushing the rest of the mud from her.

Friga was in front of her.

"Thus unto us a new dwarrow is born. Tell us, new child of Stone, who are you?" Elder Dolan's voice carried pride, love, and joy.

Who am I? "Who am I?" She echoed her internal thoughts, her voice rumbling about the chamber. Yet, instead of feeling unsure, uncertain, she stood with a sense of finality and certainty. Instead of the fear of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing, being the wrong thing, she held her head high.

"*Kesaila*." The dwarven term for growth despite errors and difficulties. Literally, 'with fire-pain.'

"*Tarui*." Strength gathered from outside and within. No tense; it was eternal.

"*Lutarui*." Bonds of the heart—love—built from outside and within.

"*Saadusk*." To be in love with creativity. No limit to what kind, it was the process by which a creative mind dictated the life.

"*Kalvvu*." She smiled at that term. Spark-stone as Friga called her but ever so appropriate. To strike without thought but never with malice and always with passion.

And finally, she said. "*Morinecu*." While *morine* was certainly known to be the declaration of family, by adding the possessive at the end, she made a strong statement. No longer was she simply accepting another's claim of *morine* over her. Now, she declared it back.

Here, was family.

Elder Dolan looked at her with warmth and tears in his eyes. He reached out and laid a hand on her hair, brief and soft, before turning and throwing his arms open to the whole of the room.

"Said with heart and vigor! With a spirit of fire that burns as the hottest flame, we name your spirit Kalvakani. Welcome, Daughter of Stone!"

"Kalvakani!" The room echoed. "Kalvakani!"

Her inner name, the name bestowed on the soul. The name that only Mother Stone would know her by.

"And…my given name?" She asked.

"You'll choose, dear child." Friga reached out and unbound the braid the young woman had carried since Friga had spoken for her, retying it

with blue and purple beads.

Maur came next, creating a long braid down her back under her six pointed star.

Then, one by one, the others came and did the same—braids to indicate her link to them. Star braids, fish tail braids, crossover braids. All with personalized beads.

Tyr came last.

She looked at him. "Did you bring them with you?"

Has he changed his mind? Was he just appeasing me? I haven't earned his—

Opening his hand, Tyr presented the bright blue stars, carved expertly with precision. The beads glistened amid the low firelight.

Quiet reigned.

"Will you braid them into my hair, Tyr, as I braid you into my life?" She lost herself in his eyes, as everything else flowed away to grey and white.

Without a second's hesitation, her hair was woven and intersected so the three blue beads formed a star within the center, settled right against her cheek.

It was a subdued celebration, unexpected yet expected. Tyr never took his eyes off her braids, gently maneuvering them to sparkle as the light caught them. A proclamation of his intentions if ever there was one.

"Child of Stone."

Turning, the young woman blinked because that was the last voice she expected to hear. He'd stayed silent the entire time.

But Yellow Elder—Elder Wali—stepped up to her, looked at her as she knelt on the ground with fresh braids and a gathering of dwarves about her.

"I tell no lies under Mother Stone's gaze." His voice came soft, not anything like the cutting tone he usually carried. "Much as I have come to respect you, I agreed to come here tonight with all thought of stopping this. Of protesting it."

He lifted a hand before the room erupted.

"But I held my tongue. Because I no longer want to put a stop to it. Maybe I never wanted to." He leaned over, close enough to look into her eyes.

"Do you?" The woman's voice came out soft, yet full of passion. "Why?"

Quiet. Elder Yellow ran his hands to rest on the ground. "Because you cannot protest a dwarrow from taking her dwarven marks. You cannot prevent the celebration of a Daughter and a Sister."

A blank look colored the woman who had once been Ember's face.

"You came to us trying to act Dwarven. The braids, the clothes, the language. But you were just that. Acting. But tonight. Here. Under Mother Stone's gaze, there was no lie."

If any further explanation was expected, the waiting audience was disappointed. Elder Wali stood, withdrew and returned to the front of the fires, bowing his head toward Mother Stone before withdrawing into the dark.

Why? What's so different? What's changed? What do you mean that I'm not acting anymore?

Despite the confusion though, her heart sang.

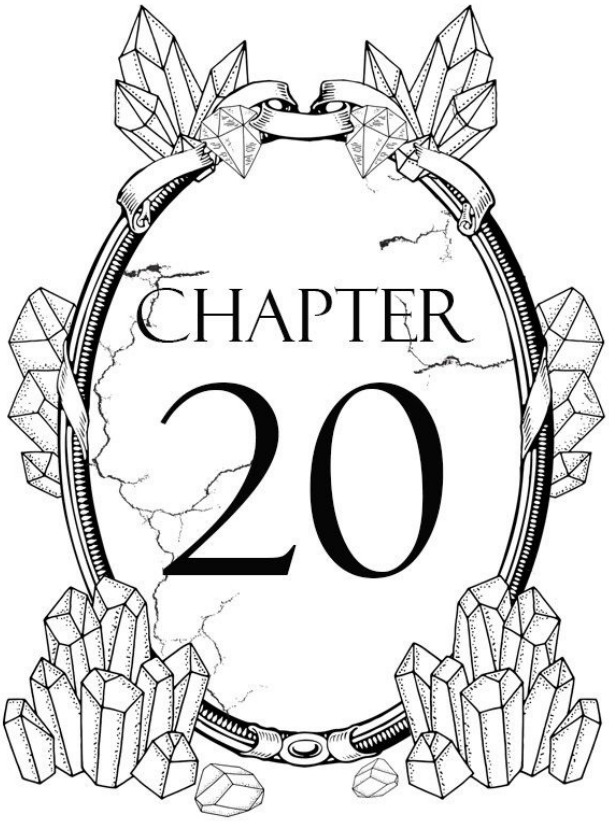
He said I was dwarrow. Not that I acted Dwarrow but that I was.

She could feel Tyr's smile on her cheek, almost as if her was her own personal moon, shining his light only on her.

Dwak's voice, soft and smooth as wine, pulled her back to the moment. He was still sitting there, waiting, his tools spread before him. He looked up, brief and kind, as he spoke. "Come."

Taking the command, she walked forward, sat on her knees and pulled her hair back, baring the skin about her hairline and temples. "I submit myself to your skill, Dwak." The final step. The marks would permanently bare what her soul now possessed.

Without another word, he lifted his small blades and ink and began.



"Looks like a dragon had an orgasm here."

Bit crude of a description maybe, but as she pushed through ash that had seeped into the ground, rotten wood and the horrid stench of stale air, it was the first image that came to mind.

"Well, we're thorough if we're covering our tracks." Tyr lifted one of the fallen beams in front of them and she passed underneath it, letting it clunk behind them both. "I'm surprised there's still any way back up."

"Wouldn't be if I didn't have a big strong dwarf with me to clear the debris."

"Oh, so that's why you let me come along? I'm the path-clearer."

She reached out and ran her finger over his braid, tracing it back up to the top and smiled when he quivered under her touch. "I think you can do a lot more things than that. But yes, you are an excellent path-

clearer."

Banter faded as the pathway ahead, made of ash, stone, broken bits of metal, and wood loomed over them. Looking it up and down, the woman who had once gone by Ember shuddered. Small holes had been made in it where knives and axes had tried to break through but been unsuccessful. She didn't need to imagine why they would have wasted time down here except to look for her.

Now, it was time to go back.

"Here." Heaving her own axe up high, she brought it down on a piece of stone and metal, prying a good chunk loose. It cleared more of a corridor but still not enough to creep through. The mass groaned and she and Tyr leapt back, cautiously waiting.

Nothing else moved.

"Maybe we should secure it first? A wee bit?"

"Maybe try to go to the left a little more? Looks more stable."

The course of work shifted. Picks and axes dislodged stone and metal, cutting through the rock as only dwarven work could. Slow-moving and her muscles tensed amid the sluggish pace.

"Why don't we just use the blasting powder to clear it away?"

Tyr eyed her, seemed to be gauging if she was serious or not. Settling that she was, he said, aghast in his eyes, "And bring the whole ceiling down on us, too?"

"You could plan it right."

"Your faith in my abilities is flattering, but no. I'd kill us both."

"I say you'd be fine." Huffing, she folded her arms, tapping her fingers on the axe handle. "This is too damn slow. The Queen will die of old age before we get to her, Fae magic or not." Pacing to the side, she remarked, "Might be worth the risk to try to get in through the front gate."

"…right. Like that doesn't have 'shoot me please,' written all over it."

"Need a hand? Or several?"

Turning, hair flying into her face at the speed of the pivot, she gave a low yelp of surprise. Standing behind them, having come from the river not long after she and Tyr (or maybe some other manner of travel—tunnels were everywhere) was a collection of dwarves. She recognized those at the front—Kva, Bofun, Oina among the others—had struggled along with her in making their first metalworks. Yet, behind those were numerous elder dwarves, probably a good fifty to sixty in number. No, more. Hundreds maybe? All piled behind one another. How had she missed so many?

Friga made up the front.

"My girl, why so surprised?"

"I…" Voice catching, she held it. "Why are you all here?"

"Now there's a foolish question if I ever heard one." Bofun stepped forward, war hammer slung over his shoulder. "We're here to help you, silly girl."

"But, you brought an army with you!"

Friga rolled her eyes. "My girl, you need one! Took off without thinking through how you were gonna handle that Fae, didn't you?"

Caught off guard, she went quiet. "I…may have been focused on the Queen."

Snorting, Tyr said, "May?"

"Okay, I was focused! Don't rub it in!" Turning back to Friga, she approached, knelt. "But this isn't your fight. It's mine."

"You're our sister. Our daughter." While the exact owner of the declaration couldn't be identified, it didn't take much for the rest of the dwarves to echo similar sentiments.

"If it's your problem, it's our problem."

"If the Council wants to stop us, they're welcome to try."

"You need all the help you can get to handle a Fae like this!"

Friga raised her hand for silence then clarified. "We're here because you're one of us, girl."

"But you haven't gone to war in centuries." Odd to call it that but war was war. "I don't want you breaking that trend for me."

"Good thing we didn't ask you then." Bofun approached and looked her firm in the face, grasping his left braid as a sign of passion. "We stopped going to war because we weren't going to risk our lives for people we could not love and trust. It wasn't a matter of never going to war, it was choosing who we deemed worthy to go to war for."

"Luckily, that isn't an issue with you." Kva lifted her own sword from her sheath, held it high. "We're here because we want to be!"

Slipping from the collection of dwarves came a voice she knew. "And we come with full hearts."

With head high, Elder Wali emerged.

"Wali." The human-dwarrow woman spoke with reverence but also a haunting pause to her voice. "You came?"

"Came?" Oina scoffed. "When he found out what was going on, he was the one arranging the groups!"

Wali said nothing in defense of such a statement.

"Why?" Perhaps she sounded ungrateful but the woman who had

once called herself Ember needed answers. “You’re the last person I expected to come.”

“And I cannot blame you for that.” Wali stood, hands folded behind his back in a gesture of sincerity and peace. “But as I said before. You are Dwarrow. I cannot pretend you are not. Dwarrow is in the spirit, in the mind, in the heart. We are not bound by such foolish tendencies as blood, bone and flesh.” Here, his eyes darkened, fell with shame. “I let myself forget that. But I can’t any longer. You are our sister, our daughter. If you have need, we will come.”

He glanced behind him at the gathered groups of dwarves. “And so we have.”

Her eyes welled up. “Wali. Thank you.” She imagined that a grander word, a more fitting word would have passed her lips but in the moment, she came up wanting. So she grasped his hands and pressed her forehead to them. A less intimate soul’s eye but one that was needed and valued. “Thank you.”

A smile, though barely noticeable passed his lips. “I think I’ve grown rather fond of ‘Yellow,’ my dear.”

“All right. Yellow Elder. Thank you.”

They lingered in quiet respect for a moment before the importance of the task before them raised its energy once more.

“Now,” Friga drew attention back with her commanding voice. “Since we’ve established we won’t be leaving, let’s see what our best course of action is. I know you’re going after the Queen.” Eyes soft and gentle, Friga took the girl’s hand. “Stay strong to your spirit, Child. Many a harsh spell can be twisted with words alone. But you remember what I say. Someone declaring something is right does not make it so any more than proclaiming sandstone to be gold gives it value.”

The young woman nodded. “I remember, Friga.”

Wali spoke out himself. “And no matter what you might be told, you are dwarrow. You are part of us. And nothing will alter that. Nor would we want it to.”

She gave a nod of understanding.

“People like your mother can be cruel.” Friga addressed the woman with determination, painted worry all over her face, giving her eyes a light tint. We’re always with you. Memory-doors are not limited to the Lake. All we’ve done together. All we will do together. If your spirit falters, open those doors.”

“Yes, Friga. Thank you. All of you.” She looked around the group and hardened her face. “We’re going to end this. Together.”

Tyr took hold of her hand and nodded. “Together, Firefly.”

“As for the rest of us, I think we need a plan to deal with this Fae, don’t you think?”

Murmured statements of agreement coursed the room and the newly-deemed dwarrow felt shame creep over her for overlooking such an important detail. Couldn’t see the gem for the facets she was sometimes. “Iron can’t kill, but it can weaken.”

“Don’t necessarily need to kill it. I’d prefer it, honestly.” Tyr twirled his braids in his fingers, intertwining them tight. “Would make things easier. But we can make it so it can’t really go much of anywhere. Dunno if we need to take Friga’s suggestion.”

Shuddering at the threat the dwarrow had delivered to the Fae Rauchin, Tyr added, “But can we make the land unusable to her, maybe? Less to draw from, less power, right?”

“She can’t use anything touched by dwarf skill. Doesn’t seem to have much of a limit—”

“Good.” Friga turned. “Groups. Now.” Turning back to the two before her, she said. “You two go together, be careful. Call for help if you need it, Mother Stone as my witness.”



COMING upon the old familiar door sent quivers through her blood.

“You okay, *makual*?” Tyr had taken to applying dwarven terms of endearment to her until she chose her new name. Ember had not left anyone’s mouth since the ceremony and odd enough, it was a comfort. Made it easier to remember whatever power her…the Queen once had over her was now gone.

“Have to be.”

Moving from within the stone walls and the old, familiar tunnels, she moved into the light, startling the guards standing before the oaken door.

“Hey! You! Freeze!”

Ducking under the first blow, she took hold of her axe, tilting it on the side and sending a hard blow to the temple of her opponent. Much as she had the feeling these guards were now working on their own accord, she’d prefer not to kill anyone if she didn’t have to.

Under the blow, the man crumbled and Tyr’s blow to the second

guard went straight through the metal. A lot more blood on that one but at least no death, at least as far as she could see.

"Go. I'll handle anything out here." Tyr's dedication was stern and firm and as he removed his blade, the Damascus pattern dancing amid the lantern light, she had no doubt he would strike down a God.

She pushed the door open, the same echoing screech of wood taking her directly back to ten years prior.

Just like that, she was a little girl again.

Sitting before her, gazing at the mirror that was the repugnant reminder of all this mess, was Queen Helga.

Five years had been kind to her, and if she knew anything about magic, the Fae was likely to blame. The same color hair, same skin tone, same posture, and she had taken to gowns so coated in gems and gold it was wonder she could move in it at all.

"Queen Helga!"

The Queen darted, mouth agape. "Who…?" She looked closer, eyes and forehead squinted and ruffled. "Impossible."

"Lots of things are impossible." The woman formerly known as Ember spoke quickly, as if the words would keep her fears at bay. "I promise I'm not one of them."

The Queen stood, her dress skirts moving about her, a slithering snake that followed her movements.

"Daughter? You're still alive? After everything. You're still alive." Face turning cloudy and dark, she spat her words as if they tasted bad. "I knew that bastard, Jacob, was lying when he brought me that heart. Too big for your little form."

Jacob had lied for her? Tricked the Queen for her? Was he—

"No huge loss when I had his head removed." Queen Helga moved, in a wave of motion and settled herself within arms' length. "I promise you nothing has changed, Daughter. If you were expecting a reunion—"

Jacob? Dead? Sorrow flooded her heart but on its heels was another emotion.

Anger.

She embraced it.

"I'm here to stop you. The people have died enough under you. No more."

Helga laughed, a deep laugh, the one born in the belly and spread throughout the body so rapidly one couldn't help but double over.

"You're here to stop me, are you? Have you not noticed the grandeur of where you stand? The glory of the palace? The—"

“I see death everywhere!” She approached, withdrew her axe from her shoulder. “People, animals, the ground itself!”

“Minor prices…”

“Minor nothing! These are lives we’re talking about!” Find the source, find the source. The symbol of where the Fae gave her power and vision and—

That mirror. That damn mirror.

She made a beeline for it, axe raised.

Helga screamed, grasped for the weapon, but no longer was her daughter a smaller and weaker child than her. If anything, it slowed her down, nothing more.

“No! You won’t take my prize from me! Zadkhanûn is nearly rebuilt!”

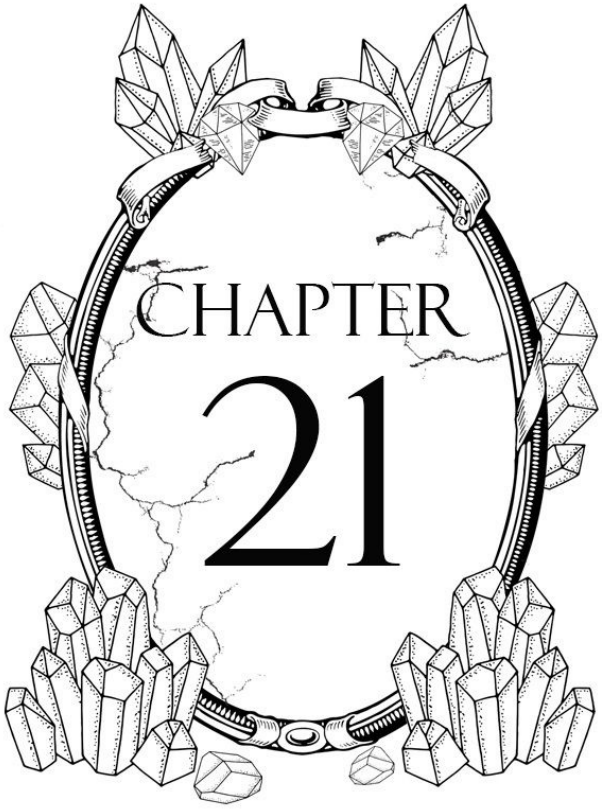
They wrestled.

They shoved.

Queen Helga swept down and shoved her daughter.

The younger woman fought for footing; she tumbled backward for the mirror’s pane. Reaching out, she grasped the Queen by the dress front, hoping their weight would send the dreaded thing to the ground in pieces.

Instead, they both fell through it.



Inside the mirror, it was bright, harsh, and brilliant, yet not pleasant, if such a thing were possible.

When the pane had given way, she'd thought her eyes would burn with the intensity of the light that erupted before her. She'd become rather unaccustomed to the brilliance of lanterns and lamps so maybe she was a poor judge. Certainly wouldn't be the first time.

Blinking away the dots in front of her eyes, the dwarrow-human stood, yelping as where there should have been ground, there it was nothing. It was no more solid than the air around her. Was she still falling? It certainly felt like it, the air rushing about her skirts and blouse fluttering but it was not a consistent fall.

Even the falling here was wrong.

Looking around, her eyes shifted, trying to catch anything tangible. It was hard to see anything, but not for the lack of light. In fact, it was the

exact opposite problem.

Inhaling, the air was stale and heavy, settling like rocks in her lungs. She might as well be closed up in a mine, cut off from the rest of the tunnel with the air recycling itself so often it was stripped of anything that might resemble freshness.

"Happy? Overreacting as per usual and now look where we are." Laughter and not the warm kind she had grown so accustomed to.

Friga's laughing carried an embrace with it always, a discussion and usually a savory treat to soothe frayed pride.

This laughter weighed her down.

The voice, oddly enough, amid this chaos of illogic was a toxic gift. As dark and cold as it was, it was familiar and some piece of her still reached for it.

You're being an idiot. Mother has been behind all of this. You've been lying to yourself these past five years and now, with it right in your slagging face, you still can't believe it?!

Mother had always sent others after her, never herself. Maybe, somewhere deep down, it was because she couldn't bear the thought of losing her?

Yes, maybe it was a possibility. A thin one, but surely all this time under the Fae had done something to her?

Just like I could decide tomorrow to become a minstrel and roam the countryside singing about the wonders of apples.

Tyr's sarcastic statement from so many years ago clawed at her heart and she could imagine the war inside her. She could nearly feel her mind screaming, shouting all these things about deception, hurt, and pain. Pain she still felt every day when she looked at herself and heard her mother's scoffing words echo in her mind.

She knew deep down, at the core of her spirit, it was fruitless. She'd never get what she sought so ravenously. But the starved soul clings to any hope, even dead hope. It still gave chase.

A brightness erupted to the side of her head and amid the white light, she found a spiral of blue, dark and cold, the type of blue that cast all life from it and buried it in suffocating pressure.

This one shone and sparkled, with a black aura amid its five points.

Stretching her fingers out, she brushed her skin on its tips, not really knowing what to expect.

The world exploded.

Black, blue, dark violet, all different shades of cold, colored the air, and her breath became cloud as it left her lips but more than anything,

the landscape gave way to a familiar scene. The whiteness melted, leaving behind the familiar stone walls of her old chamber.

Everything was bigger. She had to arch her head up to see anything and the windows loamed above her head.

Reaching out her hands, she gaped, both aloud and internally.

Her fingers were small, chubby, coated in mud and dirt. A bracelet made of white gold, red and orange stone draped over her left wrist and she recognized it immediately. She'd begged her father for it to commemorate the stories of Grieta and Jānis. Mother hadn't wanted it, but—

"Ember!"

Turning, she tumbled down and cried as the ground fell solid under her, as strong as stone. Rough flakes cut into her fingers as real as if she were there.

Her mother towered over her, far more than she had in years.

"Why?" Her mother stood there, shoulders trembling. "Why? What have I ever done to you to earn such a thing?"

"Mother?"

Her voice came out soft, shy and young. Young beyond her years.

The Queen fell to the bed, slumping as if it were impossible to remain upright anymore. "Was it so hard to ask for you to go and alert the Priestesses to our need? This was a wonderful opportunity. I was so sure I would have nothing but praise for you when you returned. You're my daughter; why can you not be even a reflection of me? A sliver of it?"

A scream, a sound she almost didn't recognize echoed as the girl was pulled upward, hard enough her feet stretched to hover on tiptoe when her long black hair was grasped, twisted into her mother's fingers and yanked taut.

"Why are you screaming? If you'd stood up like I asked you, I wouldn't have had to make you!"

"You…never asked me."

"Why do you always lie to me?" The nails dug through her hair and pierced the skin of her head. Her cries went unanswered. "How can an heir of mine be so foolish? So stupid? Can't you see people spot your lies a mile away?"

"What did I do, Mother?" She whimpered and cried aloud when her mother's fingers moved from her hair to her ear, twisting it until it burned red hot.

"I don't have time for your silly games. You have a lot of nerve to ask me…with a straight face at that…ask me what you did wrong…as if

you've ever done anything right."

With a flash of light, the chamber vanished.

She was alone amid the whiteness again.

Patting herself down in a frantic manner, she rested her hands atop her braided hair, pulling comfort from the familiar six pointed star and the beaded gems. Rubbing one in her fingers, rolling it about, a heavy weight draped over her arms and shoulders. When she shifted, a flash of the scene—a voice, a smell, a sight—invaded her mind for a fraction of a moment.

"What is…a memory?" Yes, she recalled, briefly with more detail as time rolled forward, she had lived through that before. It was one of many events she had not thought about for many years. "Those little stars are memories?"

Speaking of the stars, she looked over and about her shoulders, finding a thick and heavy blanket, one sparkled with the dead of night and dropped the weight of winter clouds on her neck and back. Shifting to move it would result in another rush of memory—the one she had lost herself in for a moment when she touched the star—and she had no desire to revisit in vivid detail the emotion already burning in her chest.

Yet, while they burned, it was not as intense as she had imagined it being. The words still hurt, they still caused pain and the realization of having lived through it was even worse. Fear was a tantalizing emotion and it was not soon forgotten.

But the words felt like lies.

Stay strong to your spirit, Child. Many a harsh spell can be twisted with words alone. But you remember what I say. Someone declaring something is right does not make it so any more than proclaiming sandstone to be gold gives it value.

"What else would they be, foolish girl?" Her mother, despite being in a similar position as she, falling and tumbling amid a world seemingly without end in all directions, maintained that superiority; it had not dulled an iota with time. "You're within a mirror and both of us contacted it when you pushed us through."

"I…didn't." Odd. She was protesting, insisting something she knew to be true, something she'd never done in the past, at least not openly. Accept lies as truth, accept Mother's truth to avoid further pain. The memory she'd barely escaped from was a reminder of why. The shame ate at the spirit.

"Sometimes the people we think we love the most are the ones that hurt us the most. They wear love as a false shawl, one they tease the warmth and

security of against the storm of the world. Oh, the things we'll do to be wrapped in that feeling even knowing it to be brief and fleeting. It takes us a long time to realize the same cloak they use to pull us close, they tighten about our neck—a little tighter, a little harder each time until choking becomes so natural we know nothing else."

Friga's words echoed about her, loud and soft all at once. For the moment, her mother vanished and she saw and heard only her dwarven family. Choking amid the lump in her throat, she reached out to it.

"I don't want that. That's a falsity. Fake love. No one that truly loves you willingly hurts you." The woman who had once called herself Ember stopped, paused, and heard her own words for the first time. "No one that did…all that she did to me…truly loves me."

She'd come to the realization when she cast off her mother's link but it had been a realization she did not desire to linger in, one that she prayed returning here would prove to be wrong, a falsity.

In her heart, the deepest pit of her spirit, she had known. But she'd listened, one last time, to the lie, anyway.

It hurt. The realization. The reality fell on her spirit with the weight of all the stones of the world. She slid, head bowed, heart heavy.

She mourned. For what she lost. For what could have been. For what should have been. For all the hope that had sustained her, wasted amid a fruitless venture.

You're not alone.

White light, a light different from the emptiness around her, gazed down at her. She blinked against it but there was no pain in its intensity. All she saw was comfort, safety, understanding, belief. Leaning against it, for a moment, the sweetness of a kiss lingered on her lips. Whether it was a kiss in the heartbeat of the present or amid the memory of that rainy night, she wasn't sure. Maybe, it didn't even matter.

What did matter was that the love in that kiss dulled all the poison.

Tyr offered her his hand, she took it without hesitation.

She stood.

And sliced the shawl from her neck.

A new strength surged in her stomach. She was more than just the Princess. She was more than just the gift from the elves. She had become, evolved, into something else over the years and she touched the fresh marks around her forehead for tangible proof.

Tiny moons, stars, and fragments of broken gems, all woven into her flesh in purple, blues and silvers.

"You still haven't quit lying, have you? Even now, you can't take

responsibility for anything."

The words were poison.

It ached to hear them, but more than anything, it ached to realize nothing she said or did would make an iota of difference. Seeing her dream of coming back, convincing her mother of the wrongfulness of her ways and then emerging victorious, a loving mother and daughter, that dream dying hurt more than anything else. Her younger self, wrapped amid the strands of her experience, wept.

Yet, her body and spirit were not as fragile as they had once been and she faced the woman with certainty. For a moment, the younger woman wondered if what she was feeling made sense, but as the beads of her promised jingled against her face, she was sure of it. She was who she was, and right now, that meant putting her people before all else.

Like this woman had failed to do.

"I was trying to give you a chance. I didn't want to end it like this. You're the one that drove us in here because you'd rather cling to magic. Even with death everywhere, that's all you care about."

The woman's face contorted, jerked.

The ever present fear and shame didn't come. How utterly strange, after all, she had recoiled for far less in her life. She did not recoil from this.

"Even to my face, you lie. Even as we're condemned to this ether-pit, you lie. The elves cheated me when they created you."

Her heart ached. It throbbed. It burned.

Memory.

She closed her eyes, focused, pulled. A place built from memory. If that was true then surely-

Remember, my little Black Star, memory-doors are not restricted to the Lake. We can call upon them anywhere.

Another star drifted for her and she reached for it, letting the light flood her again. This time, she was not taken to the palace but to a familiar underground dining hall. The bitter taste of dwarven ale settled on her tongue and while she'd since grown accustomed to it, she gagged now.

"That was a good first attempt." Maur.

"Aye, I threw up on mine." Bofun.

"You're made of diamond and mountain roots, I told you that you were." Friga.

Oh, dear, lovely Friga.

Leaning into the memory of the dwarven woman's touch, she

swallowed the words, drank them in.

"There's such a spirit in you, my girl. Not many people would take on a dwarf at the forge after two years of lessons!"

"I lost."

"Pah. You learned. More important, did you not bring me home a fine looking kettle?"

She looked down and realized the bluish container settled in her lap. The feeling of it on her fingers made her smile as she remembered the hours of labor to contort flat ore to rounded stone. "I suppose it is."

Friga still used that kettle.

"Blessed by Mother Stone I am for having such a fine gift. You don't just gift me the kettle, my girl. You gift me all the passion and hurt and sweat you poured into it. That is where worth is garnered, not just from the stone and fire." Braids touched the side of her face and she laughed as she had then, taking them in her hands and relishing the kiss they brought with them, as tangible as any brush of lips to flesh. "Fire burns all colors in you. So much it turns white, the brightest and hottest flame we know of." The woman leaned upon her dwarven caretaker, drowning in her laughter and voice echoing around the room as if they were the singular heartbeats in the world. "Aren't I lucky?"

Lucky. Someone was lucky to have her?

She shook her head, like she had then. "Doesn't feel like a fire."

"You start to not feel the heat when you're used to it. Your soul knows your fire. When you're in a deep place, where it's cold everywhere, you'll feel that fire."

Blinking her way back into reality, the woman shifted, trying to steady herself as well as she could amid this chaotic mess of emptiness and light. Her mother was closer, swimming through the air as best she could manage amid all her royal regal.

While her subjects starved.

While her subjects were killed.

While she ordered the death of her own daughter.

Deep in her chest, where she felt the spirit of the forge burn and tingle as it shot from her nerves to finger and through hammer to metal, the warmth began. An inner light amid the falsity of warmth suffocating her. She sought it out, pulled at it, as she did in the forge and such heat radiated through her. As if a star was born within her, the energy coursing through her veins.

"No. I was cheated by you."

Her voice was soft, much softer than she wanted it to be. The

gnawing uncertainty was there, if significantly lessened. From the star in her chest, she pulled. From the reflective world around her, she pulled memory after memory. Opened memory-door after memory-door.

Her first time creating a knife. Friga had spun her around, shouted her triumph to the heavens, paraded her around (much to her dismay) proclaiming. “My girl has found the Stone Mother’s gift!”

Fire of pride ignited her spirit.

The heat of self-assurance turned the ice of shame to water.

She was no traitor. She was no waste. She was no fool.

“Cheated?” The Queen’s voice was hard, sharp. Spurred, she turned to face the older woman and barely had time to raise up her arms and catch Helga by the forearms as she swam toward her.

They collided in the air, hair, and limbs amiss. For a moment, the breath fled her lungs and she gaped at the sudden sharpness about her throat.

“Cheated you? Cheated you?! The elves promised me a daughter for my kingdom! An heir worthy of it! Yet, all you have ever sought to do is lay my good name, my kingdom to ruin and waste!” Helga’s hands tightened about the younger woman’s throat, pulling a low gasp from her which she regretted immediately. Precious air.

Tight, hard and fast, the dwarrow-human pushed against the grip. Hard to focus as it was, the eyes bore into her, bit into her soul were impossible to forget.

“For the past five years I thought myself finally rid of you and here you come, yet again, to ruin my life! I have it all now! Life. Beauty. Youth. Power! And all I need to do to keep it is keep Fae Alyssum appeased. Will you not even grant me that?”

Choke. Whiteness at the corner of her eyes. Burn and tight in her throat.

“I am worthy of the Kingdom of the Gods. I will not have it taken from me. Not now. Not ever! I am so close I can smell it. I can taste the fruits on my tongue! I will pull the kingdom back by force and I’ll not have you ruin that! Not now!”

Memories were exploding all about her and she didn’t know if it was because she was touching their sources or if it was because her brain was screaming for air.

It had always been about getting that status. That kingdom. That throne. She, her father, their people, everyone and anyone was just a means to an end. She could have paraded in here with barrels full of riches and it wouldn’t have mattered.

How does a mother act?

Her conversation with Tyr not even two days ago fled in front of her eyes, dancing and twirling in full color and sound. How does a mother act?

Criticizing? Scolding? Using her as a means to boost herself up?

Or someone that guided, encouraged and was always there to offer a shoulder and support no matter what it was needed for?

Someone that scoffed any time she tried to build on her own dreams and thoughts and used shame to control you?

Someone that let you vent and scream and told you it was okay to feel whatever she felt?

Someone that brought an army to help you?

Pushing back with a knee, a fist joined the limb to force the Queen to release and former-Ember pulled in a deep gasp of air.

"You had no right to treat me like you did."

"I have every right! You're my daughter! I asked for you. I *own* you. I'm the only one that could ever have made anything from you!"

No, no, this isn't right.

The dwarves did not tell her such. They did not show her such.

Dwarves did not lie.

It was time she stopped believing the Queen's.

She grasped hold of her braids, her new braids.

The triangle braids that linked her to Friga.

The square braids, dangling by her ears that linked her to Maur.

The blue sapphires, carved neatly into six-pointed stars that proclaimed her promise to Tyr. That when all was said and done, she would return to him.

He was waiting for her.

Friga was waiting for her.

Maur, Kva, all of them. They were waiting for her to come out of this. To come home.

She'd made her choice. She had a duty, but she also had a home. A home had been forged over the last five years with tears, smiles, and embraces. Built from the fragile lies that had finally tumbled around her. They'd taken her in her darkest hour and…

They'd not built her up. No. They'd taught her how to build up herself.

She was not useless. She was not worthless and she was not alone.

She knew who she was. Her name, the meaning, the person she was determined to be.

She knew who she had created.

It came to her suddenly, without preamble.

She proclaimed it loudly, in dwarven.

"I am Kalivani!"

At the sound of dwarven, her tattoos still red and raw along her hairline, hummed a brilliant silver-blue.

The room seemed to grind to a halt and both women collided with the solid ground.

Smooth, cold. After a moment to catch her breath, the girl—claiming her dwarven name of Kalivani—ran a finger along it, getting a telltale squeak that glass gave off. She stood, her leather soled boots digging tight into the surface. Behind her, amid a wall made of the same material, she saw cracks, spider webs of fracture.

"What did you do?"

Facing the woman, Kalivani hardened her expression. All her anger, all her frustration, all the inner tears and sleepless nights became her mask. "I proclaimed who I am. I'm not your daughter. You have no power over me."

Shifting, she pushed the hard sashes of memory from her shoulders. They left a mark, almost a stain or a burn but they clattered to the glass floor with a clang and a crack. "These memories don't either."

"Stupid girl. I'll always be your mother."

"No. No, you aren't. I disown it." The clarity of the Ceremony of Forging flooded her heart, wiping away any doubt. "I cut all ties to you."

The woman's eye twitched, her muscles tensed, her voice heightened. "I pleaded for you, begged for you and this is how you repay me?"

"I owe you nothing."

"I was your mother! I am—"

"You were a lot of things, but never a mother."

"You're just like your father. Witless. Foolish. So caught up in yourselves to not see the big picture. I should have asked Alyssum to do away with you like she did your father."

Horror froze Kalivani's heart. "You…you ordered Daddy's death?"

"Fool ordered his own when he sided against me for you. You killed him!"

For a moment, guilt and shame arose. It bubbled in her heart, dampened her spirit. Her father. He had died because he tried to stand up for her? Much as it could have been a lie, she didn't think it was. Oh, she was…

Someone declaring something is right does not make it so any more than

proclaiming sandstone to be gold gives it value.

Swallowing, she defied the pain. "I didn't kill him."

"If you hadn't spoiled our chances, I wouldn't have had to—"

"If you swing the hammer, you swing the hammer." Running forward, her leather boots squeaking over the clear surface, Kalivani drew her fist back and pouring all her rage and injustice into that blow, she struck, once then twice and then a third time directly in the Helga's face. "You ordered it! You killed him! You killed him!" Her hand trembled with each blow. "Don't put the knife in my hand when you made the cut!"

Blood pooled from the woman's nose and mouth along with her garbled screech of surprise. A strong blow was made stronger with emotion and years of pain were forged into that strike. The fact it had been swinging a blacksmith hammer consistently for the past five years forged heat into its iron.

"You killed him! You bitch! You selfish, heartless bitch!" She punched again. Harder. She kicked. Faster. All that pain, all those years of doubt, of fear. All those lies that had poisoned her mind just as much as any toxin.

The unfairness of it all erupted in her rage.

Onto the ground they both went, Kalivani with fists raining down.

Helga jerked to the left and yelped when the younger woman's fist plowed into the glass floor, leaving a dent and fractures in its wake.

"All of this! Tim. Jacob. Emery and her poor little girl. Daddy. The land. Everyone else. All your fault. Your fault! I…" Kalivani paused in mid-sentence, fist still upraised amid the bruised and fractured face of the queen.

Kalivani could still hear her scolds. Feel her blows. Her shaming. Her half-hearted compliments disguised ridicule. Nothing she did was ever good enough.

They weren't true.

And she never should have been subjected to their poison.

"I…hate…you."

Felt odd to say it. For a moment, her heart twisted, scolded her for such a harsh statement.

"I hate you. I hate you. I hate you!"

Overwhelming, it was. A flood of so much anger and frustration and sadness and hopes and dreams and it was all so much. Her heart was going to explode, and her lungs were hurting, and there was so much sadness and pain inside, her veins convulsed.

But saying it, reveling in the fact that she—Kalivani—was no more to blame than the ground was to blame for a tree falling upon it came with a rush of freedom. A rush of release. Damn this woman. Damn everything she had done. Damn everything she had said. Queen Helga's toxin had nearly killed her spirit, but now it burned bright.

Life fed it.

She would suffocate no more.

She refused to let the woman try to pull her back in.

She would not.

Let Queen Helga live in the price she had paid for power. In this soulless, lifeless place.

She had to get away. She would not drown in this, starve in this, die in this.

She would not.

Slipping away from the woman, Kalivani crumbled, dug her fingers into the glass, pleaded with the stone she knew was around them somewhere. "Friga! Friga! I need you, Friga! *Nanki! Nanki*!"

The fractured wall she saw to the side seemed to grow, expand and a few heads above her, a small, circular pathway opened in the crystalline surface.

Leaving the former Queen a fractured mess on the floor, Kalivani made her way to the entrance, half running, half stumbling.

"Oof!"

Pressure on her legs sent her careening to her face.

Helga clawed over her, trying for the same entrance and more than content to use the younger woman as leverage to get there.

With a shout, Kalivani pulled the woman back, threw her to the side and ran, leaping up and pressing her fingers into the crystal walls. When they failed to hold, her axe head found its way into the glass and found purchase.

"Stop!"

Helga's voice was below her, just enough to be out of reach. She attempted to use her rings and nails to mimic the method Kalivani was using, but they were useless on hard glass. But dwarven steel held firm.

Pulling herself up, Kalivani slipped the tips of her fingers into the opening.

A firm hand, no, two hands grasped her about the elbow.

Tyr. Friga.

Both their faces appeared through the tiny circle, grasping tight at her forearms.

"Good job, my girl. Pull yourself up."

"Wait!"

As Kalivani made her way upward, the mirrored floor drifted and shifted, swirling. After all, it was the dwarven power that had given it a solid state, a testament to the consequences Fae magic suffered under such a command.

Without her, it would return to that endless and empty void.

Helga was pleading, just below her.

"Daughter, you can't just leave me here! Pull me up!"

Kalivani stared at her as her upper body made its way back into the solid world, leaning over the floor. She stayed there a moment, a fraction of time. Stared at her.

"I'm your mother! You wouldn't even be alive if not for me! You owe me! If for nothing else, you owe me that much!"

Kalivani gave her a blank stare and continued to climb, wedging her axe head out and tucking it into her belt as she pulled the rest of her body back into solid reality.

"Ember, please! Surely, we can reach a…compromise. I have been unnecessarily cruel to you. I see that. I truly do. Please, can you not give me a chance to make amends?" Desperation.

"Why would you wanna make amends now?" Tyr's voice rained down, fire and acid in its wording. "You never gave a rat's ass about her before. You're not worth the piss and sweat!"

"I am subject to flaws as much as anyone else. Please, daughter. I was so overwhelmed with the power, the magic I was offered. It can be so easy to lose your way. So easy to be blinded and lost. The Fae has that effect on people."

Nothing.

Staring at the woman, Kalivani felt nothing. No love, no desire to aid her. No longing for the old dreams she used to revel in.

"Daughter, please! Forgive me; as a good daughter would." Her voice cracked. "I am family, it is something you must do. We owe one another forgiveness." She offered, "And every daughter must have a mother."

Still leaning on Friga and Tyr, Kalivani looked at the queen, truly looked at her.

She was falsity, untruth and all the ugliness that came with it, wrapped in lies and appearance. Even the small pieces of kindness she desperately spat out were coated in deception.

For the first time, Kalivani let herself see right through it and the pain she would always carry from this woman burned in her chest. Rubbing

her fingers on Friga and Tyr's hands soothed it.

Revel in the truth. And the truth was harsh.

Kalivani let it flow from her lips, honest and passionate.

"I don't owe you anything." She looked to her two dwarven companions, family. At Tyr's gentle eyes and Friga's soft voice calling to her in gentle dwarven. No commands. Just encouragement. Everything she longed for from Queen Helga and never received. Things she should have had. "I don't forgive you, Helga. And I don't have to."

She didn't forgive her. She doubted she ever would.

"I don't forgive you. You aren't worth it."

Half falling, half tumbling into her two dwarven family members' arms, she trembled as she stood, once more on solid stone floor, turned to face the mirror. "You put all your faith, all your love, all your devotion in Fae. Let them save you."

Her axe cracked the mirror in one solid swipe from head to toe and it clambered to the ground, the image within it lost in a mist before it shattered into water, twig and melted bone.

Falsities used to make it. Illusions coated in magic.

In an instant, Queen Helga was gone, lost amid whatever magical realm made up Fae artifacts.

Slumping, her axe falling with a solid thud and clatter, Kalivani trembled and tumbled to the ground, a mess of empty limbs. She shook. She grasped her sides and rocked back and forth. She had done it.

Queen Helga was gone. She had faced her. She had faced her and come out triumphant.

Her soul screamed. In pain, in sorrow, in anger, in righteousness. In so many feelings that they were impossible to name.

A voice came out, rapid and broken. So much so that she did not even recognize it as her own. "*Nanki, Nanki*."

Without missing a beat, Friga's arms wrapped around her tight and firm. Those strong fingers stroked her hair. "Mama is here, my little Black Star. Mama is here."

Perhaps she did not have a mother anymore. In a way, she supposed she'd never had one.

But she had a Mama.

Kalivani wept.



Emerging from the chamber brought them upon chaos. While little time had passed, or so it seemed to Kalivani, time carried different meaning when it came to battle, life, and death.

Tyr had left quite a statement outside those doors before reinforcements had come, in the form of dwarf and castle staff alike. Some of the servants Kalivani recognized, others she did not. Even on those she recognized, fear had painted hair grey, faces taut, and muscles tense. Everyone had aged double what she had, if appearance were the measuring stick.

"As I live and breathe, that can't be little Ember, can it?"

Smiling, despite the dried tears on her face, Kalivani opened her arms to the older woman that suddenly pushed her way forward. "Hi, Henriette."

The old nursemaid all but buried her face into the girl's chest. "You're alive. Thank all the Gods. When Jacob brought the Queen back that heart, I thought for certain that…"

"Jacob is a lot of things. Was." Correcting herself took more strength of spirit than she cared to admit. "A murderer is not one of them."

For a moment, a heartbeat of a moment, Kalivani let herself linger in the embrace. The old woman was alive. So many were gone, but Henriette had survived. Giving a silent plea to the Stone Mother, Kalivani allowed herself to relish the familiar grip. So long, it had been so long and yet here she was, again.

Pulling away, gently, she parted from the hug.

"Gods had nothing to do with it." Kalivani was straightforward, not cruel. "And it's Kalivani now."

Tyr grinned. "Burning night flame. Suits you."

Realization that Tyr and Friga were giving her a smile of approval lit the light in her heart and for a moment, the pain and emotion of loss dulled. If there was more time, perhaps she could have addressed the conflicting feelings but the moment demanded her attention be elsewhere. She came to save her people.

They weren't free, not yet.

Kalivani turned her attention back to the moment. "Where's the Fae?" She sought the room for signs, any sign. What she was exactly looking for, she couldn't say, but if she could feel that mirror destructing, one would think she'd come running.

Nothing.

"Outside." One of the guards answered after a moment. "Princess." Dropping to one knee, he said, as his fellow soldiers followed. "Forgive us, Princess. We never meant to do all the horrific things she had us do. I promise you, on my honor. She started out not—"

The castle suddenly shook, lurched, as if the ground beneath it was full of holes. Stone crumbled from the walls and the ground sank, pulling tile and rock with it. An opening when two large tiles split apart nearly took a guard and dwarrow to the next floor down, if not for the rapid actions of those nearby, yanking them from the pull of gravity. The movement continued for a long minute and Kalivani clutched at her stomach. Not from movement but from something else, something deeper and more intimate.

"The Stone is sick." Friga's voice was calm yet intense, leaving no room for arguments or interruption. "It's been sick a long time."

Of course. The stone was as subject to the Fae's demands as anything

else, perhaps even more so.

"Damn Fae pulls from everywhere." Looking about, Kalivani grasped her old nursemaid by the shoulder. "How many are left?"

The old woman's eyes pained. "Twenty, maybe less."

Twenty. No wonder the palace had felt so empty when they entered. Her spirit had known even if her eyes had not. "So few. But it works for our advantage now. Henriette, take the guards here and get whoever is left. Get them out. What about the people? How many are left?" Inwardly, she worried most about Emery. So emotionally fragile when she left what would five years have done?

"More of them than us, they've scattered in the huts and homes outside the courtyard."

"Bofun, Kva, Oina." Fixing her eyes on the three, she said, "Get the people out. If the Fae is running, whatever slap dab magic she's used to hold this place together is going to go with her." After a moment, she said, "Meet up with the others. No matter what, keep the people protected. Don't come for me unless they're protected."

"We ain't gonna abandon you." Bofun quickly added, with a clasp of his hand to her forearm but with a nod and smile before a protest could escape her lips. "Luckily, those two requests aren't incompatible." With that, he released the grip and withdrew, calling out to the others in dwarven.

Taking that promise to heart, Kalivani ran down the hall, grasped the long curtains and slid to the ground floor, making for the exit. If there was one thing for certain in her mind, the Fae was not going to get away.

What she would do with her or how she even planned to combat her, she wasn't sure. Who knew how strong the Fae had grown, sucking all the life from the land and people like a cursed leech?

But she would not get away. She could not.

As her boots slid across the crumbling floor, she came to a rest amid the main hall. Kicking the decorative rug to the side, she ignored the draw to reminisce. Moving to her knees and—pressing her fingers into the rock—even as it crumbled beneath her weight, Kalivani cast all other thoughts away. There was no stress, there was no sorrow. There was no pain. There were only two things—her and Mother Stone.

"Mother Stone," she spoke gravelly, with purpose and solemn respect. "You ache in pain and I ache with you. I ask you now, even if it's this time alone, answer me. You see all through the earth—rock, pebble, stone, dust. Lead me to your murderer."

For a time, she waited. Mother Stone had never answered her before.

It had been a subject of contention, an almost unspoken rejection she had fought to overcome. In a way, she understood it, considered perhaps the Stone Goddess answered those of dwarven blood and no one else. After a while, she'd steered herself to other gifts, other methods, other ways to embrace the gift of stone and fire.

It had taken several years for her to realize that dwarves, and by extension, dwarven Gods, gave no more thought to blood than the hammer to the metal it forged.

Before, she used to imagine that the reason Mother Stone never answered her was because of her blood; it seemed to reinforce the idea the gift of stone manipulation and sight was not to be hers and her skill would lie in other avenues.

But now, for the first time when she called, her body tingled, the blood within her stirred and she saw with the eyes of the earth.

"There you are."



THE STONE SCREAMED.

Kalivani used to dream about when she would finally hear the song of stone and it was always a sweet melody, the soft murmur awakening a deep section of the heart which would send one into a living spiritual awakening. The living sun rising in the eyes of anyone lost in Stone's song was something she longed for and in her dreams, when she achieved it, her soul warmed.

The Stone screamed at her and each time she took a step, knives and fire rushed through her body, touching every fiber of her spirit. Pain beyond what could be physically described—grief, anger, loss, loneliness, betrayal—it all rushed her body, clouding her mind.

Yet, the screaming was her guide.

Each time her foot pressed into the earth, her mind saw it. A burst of color and smell and taste and feel. As she made her way out from the castle gates, she stopped, only briefly, to strip off her boots. It might have seemed a foolish gesture but when her bare flesh pressed into the earth, Mother Stone responded.

Crystal clear, as if it were directly in front of her. The burnt out fields, the old rotting oak tree, the smell of lightning in the air.

Another foot down and the earth shifted, ever so slightly, to turn her gait toward the left. She followed it, speed urged onward every so often with a push upward and forward from the earth itself. They were not huge chasms, nor large heaves forward, but they were enough that she cleared a large field with the others struggling to follow her shadow.

Her hand went to her axe. Much as she would have loved to be swinging a sword of Damascus and the chime of the blade to sing of her anger, her skill with sword was not good enough for a battle, especially not one of this magnitude.

An axe she had learned to control, at least effectively enough, and it would serve her purpose.

Coming over the hill, her eyes didn't have to look far. The Fae was hardly trying to hide her presence though she was certainly moving quickly. With the center of her spell gone, all she had left to draw from was a land and people already mostly dead.

Running. The damn Fae was trying to flee.

Her. It all came back to her. This was the thing that had sent her entire Kingdom into ruin. Her father's death. Jacob. Tim. The people. The palace. The dying earth. All because of her. And now that she had gotten what she wanted, she was going to run. Like a cloth used so often that it could no longer be repaired.

The people meant nothing to her. The pain she'd caused. It all meant nothing.

Grip tightening on the axe hilt, Kalivani threw it, the handle leaving her hand before she was even on level ground again.

The axe hit the Fae's cheek, a graze really before soaring onward and slamming into a tree trunk. The rotten wood, unable to take the strain, crumbled.

Alyssum turned.

She'd changed a lot. Skin still pale but there was brightness to it, sunlight painted into a white tone. No longer hiding her appearance, her long ears and fingers were in full view.

She'd also opted for clothes more suited for the Queen than any kind of servant or even fellow nobility. Long skirts, wide sleeves, deep dyed colors. This Fae knew the true power laid with her; her clothes flaunted it.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Kalivani approached, her bare feet seeping into the wet earth, kicking up clumps off dead grass as she moved. She dug her toes in, taking solace in the feel of rock and stone.

Occasionally, a small animal skeleton would be unearthed, rising

from the dead soil. She stepped daintily around them, offering what respect she could.

"The young Princess, is it?" Alyssum, her Fae musical voice in full bloom, plastered a smile as false as her kindness on her face. "Oh, what a surprise. I'm sure we all thought you dead."

"My scars disagree with you."

Alyssum tilted her head, offered that sickly sweet smile again. "Well, what else were we to think of a pampered Princess when she simply vanishes into the air? Death seemed the only thing to make sense."

The twitch of her mouth spoke volumes more than her words.

"More like you wanted me to be dead."

"I didn't believe it."

The unexpected voice drew Kalivani's attention to the side and she saw not just one, but multiple people making their way across the field.

They looked half-alive. Patched clothes with deep holes, weather worn faces, eyes half drowned in their skin. The protruding bellies of perpetual hunger, the half-healed wounds. Yet, they walked upright, with purpose, with intent.

Up front, a scythe in hand, was Emery.

Behind her came dwarf and dwarrow, weapons drawn of their own.

"Damn girl's too stubborn to die, least not by you." Emery's eyes fell to Kalivani and she drank in her appearance, from head to toe. "Did pretty good for yourself."

A part of Kalivani longed to rush the older woman, hug her and plead she was sorry it had taken so long but there was a time and place for that and now wasn't it.

"Alyssum, I think you know why I'm here." Kalivani approached, hands remaining firm at her sides.

The Fae looked from one side to another, realizing Emery's small band had just been the start. A collection of peasants—men, women, and children—along with a hefty number of dwarves were making her personal space more and more constricted. Each face colored in anger and each hand full of weapons from the stumbling old men to the youngest child.

"I suspect you've destroyed the mirror." Fae eyes glistened between shades of green and yellow, almost simultaneously, she gestured to the crumbling fortress of stone and wood amid the horizon. "I take it you never expected it to mean you were killing your own palace."

"If you're waiting for me to care, you'll be waiting a while."

"Oh?" Alyssum hovered above the ground, her dress skirts fluttering

about in the wind. “Not even when all the memories you have are sent down into ash?”

Kalivani set her jaw in a firm line. “My memories are not fragile.” Stepping forward, she approached, ever closer. “But maybe you are.”

Hands illuminated, the Fae snorted, amusement wrinkling her eyes. “Really? Do you plan to kill me with your bare hands, little girl?” With a glance at the axe just behind her, she offered, “You’ve already given me your axe, rather stupid of you in retrospect.”

Without a pause in her step, Kalivani reached into her side, pulling the short sword from its sheath, the metal casting shadows of its own on the ground. “Stupid of you to assume a dwarf carries one weapon.”

For a moment, a shadow passed over Alyssum’s eyes. Not quite fear, but no longer calm. When her sight drifted upward Kalivani all but felt her vision center on her Dwarven tattoos.

The Fae faltered. Small, barely noticeable. But she faltered.

“And you mean to kill me with an iron sword? You don’t pay attention to stories, little girl. Iron can’t kill me.”

“It can sure hurt a lot.” Flexing the hilt of the blade in her hand, Kalivani challenged her, feet firmly set. “And if you’re so powerful, why haven’t you struck at us yet?”

For a moment, Alyssum wavered, simply drifting up and down, the sane speculative gaze upon her face as she’d possessed since cornered. There was darkness to her look, a dangerous gaze threatened lethality if too much pressure was applied.

“Are you asking me to attack you? I’d be more than happy to oblige.”

“Then do it.” Kalivani spread her arms wide. “Do it!”

“Tread with caution; do you think your declaration of being Dwarven carries any weight? Human blood and flesh contains your soul. The universe knows who you are.”

“So do I. More now than ever. Do you? Because I think you know you don’t have as much power right now as you want me to think you do.” Kalivani gave an unpleasant smile. “Prove me otherwise.”

For a moment, silence. Not even the sounds of birds or animals. The wind fell limp, an overwhelming sense of cold behind.

Alyssum moved like a fever, swift and unrelenting, releasing a torrent of fire from her fingertips, so close to Kalivani’s face the air between them caught flame.

Kalivani’s hair blew, the force spewing wind whipping her braids behind her.

Her tattoos hummed a light silver-blue, sparkling stars amid her pale

skin and the flame died in the hair's breadth above her flesh.

"Fae magic versus Dwarven. Not much of a challenge."

Alyssum cursed. "You're human…how can you…?" Seeming to realize her façade had dropped somewhat, she tossed her hair over her shoulder and tried to settle her face. "How about I make your people suffer for your arrogance? Considering all the trouble you've gone to for them…" Raising her hand again, she cast her gaze to the gathering people around her. "How about I take what little strength they have left?"

Her fingers hummed, and for a moment, a similar light took the humans gathered with them. Kalivani's breath went cold but her heart calmed. She had entrusted them to her dwarven family and they would not fail her.

She recognized the tiny beads tied around wrists, into hair or woven haphazardly into clothing. They became lightly-colored under the Fae's magical mist and the people didn't move, grow limp or change in the slightest.

Emery lifted her scythe. "That 'posed to do something?"

Alyssum faltered again.

Kalivani spoke, sword leveled. "Guess we're going to handle this hand to hand."

Teeth clenched and eyes ablaze, the Fae wasn't about to relent. "Fine."

The Fae turned her attention to the ground, the trees, anything around her. Pulsing with light and power, she called to it, commanded it.

The ground didn't respond. The trees groaned and wove, but did little more, several cracking to splinters under the pressure.

"Enough talk!"

Emery ran forward, swinging her scythe. Alyssum caught it on her forearm and the iron drew the slightest sliver of blood. Eye to eye, the Fae hissed, the snake-like presence she hid under the cloak of nobility coming out in a voice the sound of crushed leaves. "Ah. It's you."

Kalivani struck, her sword connecting with Alyssum's arm, forcing her to withdraw. Yet, she was close enough to catch the veiled taunt.

"What's that mean?" Emery's voice demanded a response. "What's that mean?"

"I've seen you before." Oh, there was darkness in those eyes. Not the kind of darkness brought by night. This was deeper, the kind not even moonlight could penetrate. "When I took that little girl."

Kalivani's hand went to her mouth. "Hannah?" A whisper of a word.

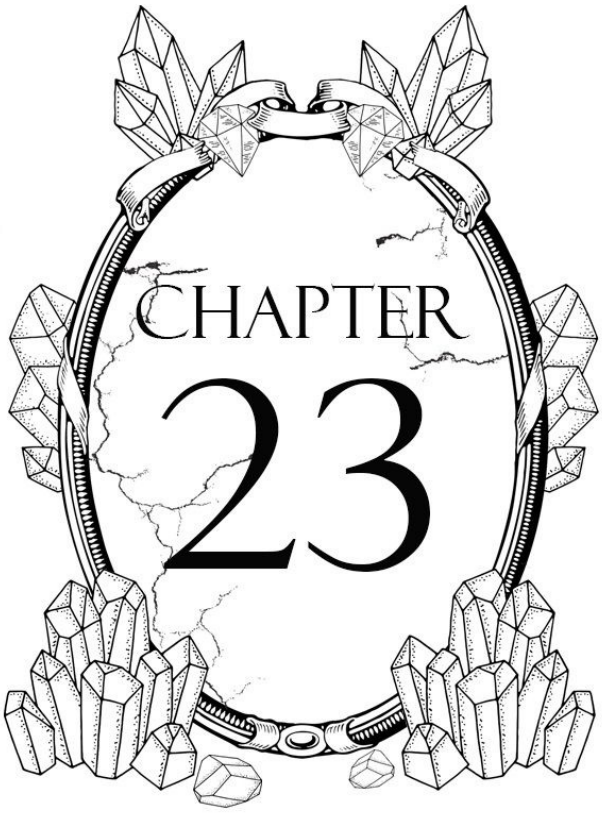
“My girl?” Emery sank, as if her bones shattered to glass. “My baby?” Rage ignited in her eyes, setting the landscape aglow, as if there was no other light except the unbridled wrath of a grieving mother’s soul. “You’re who took my baby!”

“Children have the strongest energy.” Alyssum licked her lips. “They taste the best. Fresh into life? All the better.”

Kalivani quivered, her muscles convulsing as emotion overwhelmed her mind. The tiny baby they’d found drained of everything that resembled life. It had been *this* Fae? How long had she been watching them? Long enough to come and pry children from her people? This was who was to blame for Emery’s broken heart?

The sob that tore from Kalivani was deep, from the center of her heart.

The roar that came from Emery was inhuman and no force in the world could have stayed her as she charged.



Chaos dominated.

For all the stories on the glory of war and battle, they did not hold up in reality. There were no grand speeches, no heroic stances, and no time for breath or rest. Cacophony reigned: yelling, shouting, screaming all mixed with the clash of metal and iron.

One would think taking on one enemy with a whole army would have been easy.

Fae were notorious for a reason.

While none of her magic could take effect on them, nor on the grounds about them, it had no bearing on her use of it within her own form. There, she had full command and she used it to her full advantage.

She made herself tall. Shrank herself, turned invisible. Made multitudes of herself. Fighting one was hard. Fighting fifty was near impossible.

Didn't stop them from trying.

Jump to the left.

Duck.

Strike, sword out.

Puff of mist and she was gone, reappearing some distance away, but still close enough to throw a weapon of her own.

She was not above picking up the weapons of the fallen, either.

Don't focus on that. Kalivani struck, drawing what should have been blood if it was a mortal. *Keep fighting. Not even Fae have limitless energy, remember?*

If they could wear her down, there might be a chance to render her harmless, similar to how they had handled the Fae in Gralcimm. It wasn't much of a chance, but currently, it was one of the few they had—

A scream. Not a regular scream.

Kalivani couldn't really say she'd ever heard one of that caliber before. It sounded like the soul was crying, shouting out to the heavens. When she whirled to find its source, a scream of her own joined the commotion.

"Emery!"

Blood coated the woman's front, a deep, dark shade as she slumped to the ground.

She was still.

No. No. No. No. She couldn't see any more death. *No more death, no more!*

With a roar of her own, she clashed with the nearest Fae form, her sword and retrieved axe swinging in unison. Briefly, she could hear Tyr crying to her about not acting rash but her mind had no use for such warnings now.

Fierce and sharp as her blows became, they also became loose, clumsy, erratic.

Ducking under a blow of wind, Kalivani pulled her hammer from her belt and swung it at the sharp chunks of rock sent her way. Connecting hard and fierce, her arm throbbed and screamed as stone met metal and her trusted hammer cracked, splitting from head to handle.

Sadness ripped through her, manipulating her sight and senses for a moment. All the crafts and trials she had endured, learned, and loved with that hammer. Even amid the tension and fear of life and death, the loss cut her. Her sword wavered.

Miscalculation only needed a moment, a sliver of time, and a faltering weapon was more than enough. At the next blow, her stance slipped and

she tumbled to the ground, flat on her back against the hard dirt.

The pinprick of a blade touched her throat a moment later.

"You're a stubborn one." Alyssum leaned her weight against the hilt, enough to push droplets of blood out of the skin. "Never met someone so utterly obstinate before. You'd have been better off staying wherever you fled to, Girl."

Grunting, Kalivani wrapped her hand around the blade, pushing back to lessen the weight. Blood trickled down her hand for the trouble, but it let some air push through her throat.

"Fae take what we want because we can. What are you now? Dirt like a human? Rock like a dwarf?" She leaned in closer, half floating, half tilting. "Doesn't matter on the whole, does it? Fae are stars, we burn forever. You really think your little skirmish here will make a fraction of difference in my life?"

The truth burned. She didn't want to believe it. She couldn't—wouldn't—believe it. No, she had not come this far just to let it end with a loss. Too many losses already. Too much death, too much of all of this.

Darkness crept into the Fae's eyes, the kind triggered by inner thought and conniving planning. "Do you think any of the past wars made a difference? You mortals are so easy to manipulate, human and dwarf alike." Gloating. There was no mistaking that narcissistic tone. Kalivani knew it enough from Helga.

Use that.

"Manipulate? You didn't fool me. Didn't fool my people. You had to result to magic to take them. Not much of a victory if you ask me. Only person you managed to sway was the Queen. Bribery isn't much of a feat."

There it was. The twitch of eye. The snarl, the barely contained exclamation of exasperation. Good.

"You think in petty human terms. We certainly swayed folk after the death of those dwarves and humans, didn't we? You all weren't exactly on speaking terms when I arrived."

Human? Dwarven? As in…Dwarven children? Human children? Not on… oh, by Mother Stone herself…

"The War of Three. You. It was you Fae that caused those deaths!" Rage conjured magma in her eyes and the thundering of a thousand hammers rocked her mind so hard that her teeth ached. "You killed children!"

"Enjoyed it, too. I'll enjoy ending your little life. You squirm about as much as they did." A grunt. "Hardly as smart. They died quickly." For a

fraction of a heartbeat, the last looks of all those children—human and dwarven—stared out from those Fae eyes. A magical memory conjured with such sickening joy it turned the stomach and sank the heart. "Would do you well to mimic them in tribute!"

"I've never been good at losing." Kalivani wheezed out, licking away the blood that threatened to drip off her lips.

"Get off of her!"

The hard thwack of Tyr's war hammer colliding with the Fae's chest was a welcomed sound. She stumbled off, her physical body still taking the blow, enough blue-green liquid spilled from her mouth, a shimmering mess that in any other circumstances would have probably been beautiful.

Gasping in air, Kalivani rolled onto her hands and knees as she fought to her feet. As she did, her little, orbed jewel rolled from her tunic to the ground dark with blood. Tyr's gift to her. She grasped it quickly, pulling it into her chest. Her own personal star…

Fae are stars.

Only a star can kill a star.

How many girls have someone that can make stars for them?

Standing, she rushed to join Tyr, but as she ran, she sheathed her sword, set her axe aside. Instead, as she encroached on their battle, Tyr being a living and breathing storm of hits and blows, she pulled her blacksmith hammer from her belt.

Words are powerful, little Black Star. We give them power.

"No more!"

She flung herself, head long, into the fray, forcing Tyr to jerk his hammer down in a sharp opposite direction to avoid hitting her as she and the Fae collapsed to the ground, Kalivani straddling her.

Words without order cast through her mind as her fingers brushed into the earth. Senses with no name, sadness without end, anger with no limit, love with no bottom and a desire more than anything to see justice done. A surge of strength that came not from herself, but rather from the knowledge and realization that her entire family stood behind her—her true family—would not settle for anything but seeing her heart put to peace.

Thrusting her broken hammerhead into the earth, impact spreading the crack so wide that pieces of metal began to fall, her voice thundered out in dwarven as if on its own accord. "*Düile*!"

The metals contained within the soil stirred and trembled. Called by the magic inherent in dwarven skill, they melted and swirled. All kinds

of metals, hard and soft, flowed into the broken hammer, pulling the pieces together.

As the light reflected off gems' facets, the combination of metal swelled, mixing and combining until the hammerhead glimmered with all shades of silver, white, and even minor flecks of copper.

Pulsing through it, as readily as blood in veins, was strength. Raw, unfiltered strength. Strength that came not from outside but from within. All her pain, all her triumph, all her desires: all given physical form.

Passion, the undiluted energy that sank into everything Kalivani did ran through the hammer, same as her blood, sweat, and tears was bonded into that first pot she gifted to Friga. The same passion that all her future projects carried.

All that passion took on a magic all its own.

Fae Alyssum howled in pain, a shrill, unearthly sound, as if the mere presence of that hammer burned.

Kalivani needed no further motivation.

Before the creature could get a moment's reprieve, she lifted her hammer, pushed the beautiful orb she had come to treasure so much into Alyssum's chest and brought the tool down with all her strength, screaming, "*Düle*!"

The orb shattered, its pieces pressing deep into the Fae's flesh. At first…nothing. It seemed a simple, fruitless attempt but as Alyssum kicked Kalivani off, she rolled to her knees and stared at her hands.

They were turning grey, a slate grey like old rainwater.

"What did you do…?"

Not long following, the color became textured—wrinkled, old, and withered. As the light of a candle nearing the end of its wick, it faded. It was enough to turn the skin nearly transparent. When the Fae grasped at her hair, it came away in clumps before blowing away as dust in the wind.

In the same manner, the other duplicates of herself faded entirely, leaving the battlefield a confused chaos for a time.

The Fae's screams brought all attention to her before long.

"What is this? What have you done to me? What magic is that?!" Her voice grew hazy, rough, and rigid. The softness left her limbs and the skeletal underbelly became apparent. As she stumbled, no longer able to hover or stand, bruises and bleeding began where any of her weight fell.

"Like you said. You're a star." Kalivani lifted her head high, even as her throat clogged at the loss of her precious orb. It had rested against her chest so perfectly and now her breast was cold and empty. All the

love that Tyr had poured into it…it wasn't right it was used on something as treacherous as this Fae.

But she had her victory. "And only a star can kill a star. That was my star."

"And," Tyr moved to stand next to her, hand on her elbow. "Kalivani. Burning night flame. What does that sound like to you?"

"Impossible." Tears, sobbing, open fear. "No Fae has died before. Where will I go? I can't…"

Her voice failed not long after.

Kalivani narrowed her eyes, held her hammer tight and Tyr's hand tighter. "Wherever it is, I hope you suffer."

The Fae looked at her and for a moment, a brief moment, she was mortal. Old, decaying and full of fear, uncertainty, and doubt.

Taking up the Warhammer from Tyr, Kalivani swung.

The body shattered, leaving behind nothing but clouded, broken glass.



"Forgive me, Emery."

Spoken quiet and to the ground even as she worked, Kalivani wet another scrap of cloth and cleaned the blood from the woman's chest. It had been a quick blow, one that bled out quickly. She probably didn't even feel much of it.

Little consolation.

She'd come back to save her people. Now, it turned out she had about a tenth of her people left. Emery had been dealt the worst of blows. Realizing her daughter's murderer commanded her life for the last five years.

At least she could be with her Hannah now.

"Kalivani?"

"*Nanki*." Using the dwarven word for Mama had started to come so naturally. When she'd first said it, in an emotional heap outside that mirror, it had come from within, deep in her own spirit, in much the same way her dwarven name had come to her.

"I'm right here, Child." Warmth from a hand settled on her shoulder and she tilted, letting her hair drift. The touch of dwarven fingers was a

comfort and a moment later, the much desired 'soul's eye' gave a swell of deep love to her chest—unexpected and overwhelming.

Warm, soft. Carrying with it the very essence of being held tight into the chest, protected and savored. As if there was nothing else in the world that mattered as much as this moment, this time. It was a stroke to the hair, a kiss to the forehead, a warm meal amid the cold of winter. It was the curl of one body into the side of another. The energy of acceptance that drove all dark thought to retreat into the back of the mind.

The temptation to drown in the sense of belonging made her throat choke.

So, this is Soul's Eye.

Mother Stone had opened her soul's eye.

"Don't blame yourself, my Black Star."

"How can't I, *Nanki*? I came back to save her and instead she died. She died by her daughter's killer!"

"Yes. But that wasn't your doing."

"I didn't save her."

"I think in a way you did."

Lifting her head heavy with grief, loose strands of hair sticking to her tear trails, Kalivani choked out her question, as if the process caused her physical pain. "How? She's dead."

"So is her daughter's killer." Friga stroked the loose hair from the girl's face. "My girl, your people are free and that means anything linked to that damned Fae is free, right? I'd wager that means Hannah's little spirit is flyin' with her mother right now."

Squeezing her eyes tight, Kalivani nodded.

"It's okay to be sad, Child. Mourn for her. But don't carry a burden that isn't yours."

She wanted to answer, wanted to say she understood and she would try. She wanted to smile at the thought of Hannah and Emery back together again, even if it wasn't in the living world. She wanted to cry up to the heavens the murderer had been vanquished and justice had been done not just for the Fae but for the evil Queen who had let it happen.

But a heavy heart sometimes freezes the tongue.

Luckily, she had finally learned tears carried just as much weight.



“So, that’s how you did it, huh?”

Kalivani walked side by side with Tyr, the stars above glistening brighter than it seemed they had in years.

“Oina’s idea. The grass around here may have been dying but it wasn’t dead yet. Little drop of dwarven blood or iron into it and the roots took it everywhere.”

“Smart.”

They were quiet again.

“Tyr. Did you hear what she said. About—“

“I heard.”

“Do you think it’s true?”

Tyr considered before he answered. “I don’t know. Do I doubt that selfish Fae would do something like that to turn a war in their favor? Sure, in a spark’s time. No better way to gain advantage in a war than to turn the other factions against each other.” Heaving a sigh, he took hold of her hand and gave it a squeeze. “And yeah, feed an emotional moment like that into an alliance still on shaky ground and mortal nature will take care of the rest.”

“All those children. On both sides. They were…the Fae made them pawns.”

“They did. It’s not right.”

“And we…both sides…we let ourselves be sold all those lies. And we ate them up. All this time, can you imagine where we would be if we hadn’t fallen for that? Where both our races would be?”

“Further than we are now, that’s for sure. But we’ve got another chance now. With you.”

Head down, her hair drooping, Kalivani shook her head. “With me? The Princess that had to leave and came back to…”

“Kalivani, don’t blame yourself.”

Closing her eyes, she let her breath out. “I’m trying not to. But there’s so few of them left, Tyr. When I fled, there were at least ten thousand people here.” Rubbing her eyes, she threw her arm out. “Now? Maybe a thousand, if even that.”

“That’s a thousand lives you’ve saved.”

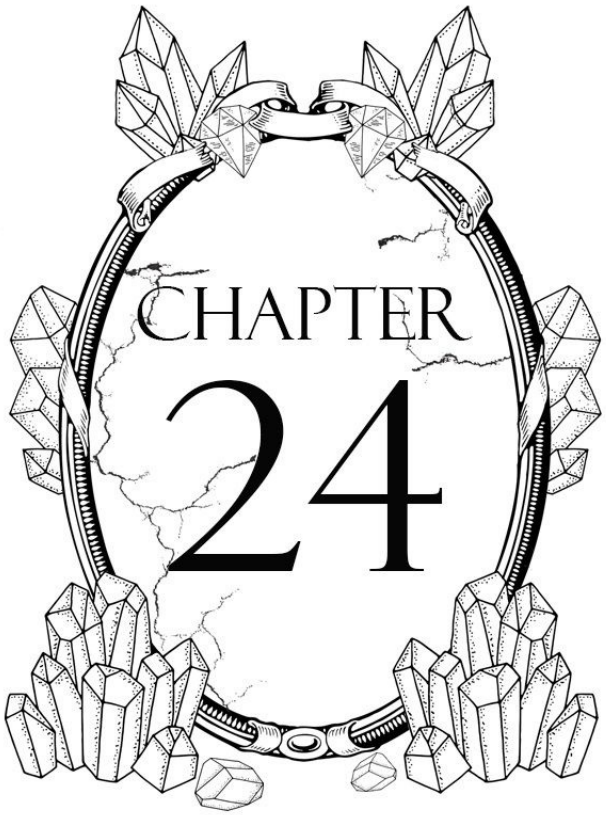
“We.” She corrected. “I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Lowering her head, she confessed. “But the land is dead, Tyr. Maybe some of it can be saved but most of it is just like Gralcimm—rotten, drained, empty. They can’t live here.”

“So, let’s take them somewhere else.” He smiled. “I meant what I said before we came. And the others’ll support it, too. Heck, if we need to, let’s find a mountain and make our own kingdom! Mother Stone gives us the entire world to work with, you know.” He reached up, ran his finger along her Promise Braid. “I did promise you I’d build you a new world out of the ashes, didn’t I? To that, I hold.”

“You always know what to say, don’t you?” Turning to him, her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “But what do I say to them, Tyr? I’m alive and so many of their loved ones aren’t. If I had any way to save them, I would have. If I could have come earlier, I would have.”

“Tell them that.”



In the end, that was what she did. Hard to organize everyone together, but with the dwarves going about offering food and what wound care they could, it wasn't hard to get most people within hearing distance.

Friga took her right side and Tyr took her left.

She considered drawing on her old lessons, the old political lessons, but ultimately, she decided not to. Political games had done nothing to help in the past. Made things worse, fed baseless fears. She'd be a part of that no longer.

Instead, like Tyr suggested, maybe it was best to simply tell them the truth. Not much to offer, maybe, but it was honest.

She broke as soon as she opened her mouth.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

Tears, the start of which she had shed on Friga's chest after leaving the Queen behind, erupted in full.

"You suffered so much and I couldn't save you! I was safe and you

were dying. If I could have come earlier, I would have. If I thought I could have done anything earlier, I would have. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I don't know what we're going to do, but I'll find a way to give you your lives back. If I have to—"

"Princess."

The sharpness of the voice made her stop. She opened her eyes, blinked away the misty blurriness and when that failed, she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, leaving behind dirt and grime, making her resemble a raccoon more than anything else.

The words came from one of the blacksmiths. They were older now but still the same faces she'd grown up around.

"You came back."

Nodding, she added, "It's all I thought about these last five years. Coming back. Saving you."

"You were safe." A woman this time, with her little ones by her side. At closer gaze, she saw Helen's eyes in one of the little ones. "You were safe and you left."

"For us?" One of the children asked.

She nodded.

"Why didn't you come back sooner?" The accusation stung.

Friga answered. "And tell me, what would a frightened girl have been able to do? She'd have gotten her own death, nothing more."

"You don't know that!"

"Considering we barely managed to come out alive with a *slagging* army, I'd say yeah, I'm pretty sure."

"My family died!"

"Our lands are gone!"

"We've no homes anymore!"

"Shut up!" Tyr's thunderous shout rang so unexpected even the humans went quiet.

Heaving, Tyr all but snarled at the crowd. "You think she doesn't know that? Know how many times she's cried about it and cursed she couldn't do anything to stop it? Just because it shouldn't have happened doesn't mean she had any way to stop it."

"I wanted to."

Finding her voice again, Kalivani lay a hand on Tyr's shoulder. "I don't blame you for being angry. I think I'll be angry about it until the day I die. I lost my father, lost my mother, lost my home, and I think you all know much better than I what it means to struggle. But I can't do anything to undo it. If I could, if I could go back and stop that Fae from

ever entering the castle, I would have. If I could have stopped her from getting any kind of hold, I would have. If I could have stopped the division between our races centuries ago, I would have. But I can't. All I can do is try and build from now."

"From what? Dead land, dead trees, rotten water?"

"Not all dead. Not entirely. But I don't know. Maybe not here. Somewhere else. Find a new place, find new harvest land, till the earth. I'm not sure. But I don't mean to let you starve and die. I won't. My family." She gestured about her to the dwarves. "Would welcome you into their home. I know many of you don't want that. I won't say I blame you if you leave, if you try to make what lives you can. But if you stay, I promise, I will sweat and bleed with you."

She turned away and left them with those words.

Or, she moved to turn away.

"Your Majesty."

Freezing in her turn, she shifted, bringing her face back around.

It was the little girl, the one with Helen's eyes that had come forward. "You bury Papa?"

The landscape went still.

Choked in her throat, Kalivani answered. "Tim. Yes."

"Found the pretty stone." The small child looked at her, wordless, then said. "You did that?"

"It was less than he deserved but it was what I could offer him."

Murmuring spread among the crowd. From adult to child and back again. Sampling of words here, short sentences there.

Finally, one of the older men spoke. "None of us have had proper burials in years. You could have been killed for trying it. If you were hiding, why risk it?"

"Because he deserved it."

Once again, scattered murmurs and whispers. Slowly, one by one, man and woman, stepped forward and sank to one knee before her. Then their children. Gradually, one by one until nearly the entire crowd had done so.

Not all. Quite a sampling walked off, grumbling towards the distance, but they were a choice few among the majority.

"We pledge ourselves to you. Where you go, we will follow. Be here or beyond."

Kalivani swallowed. "Pl-please, get up. I hate to see people bow. I'm a person, just like you." She waited and when they obeyed, she said, "We can take refuge with my family, until we figure something out. We'll

rebuild, I promise. Find some way to get to fertile land or good water and—"

The ground shook.

Kalivani tumbled to her knees, the dwarves flung to their backs and the people screamed. Some proclaimed it was the spirit of the Fae to take vengeance. Others called out to the Gods for aid. Others rushed to Kalivani's side.

The ground rumbled and the remains of the palace collapsed into dust. Much as it hurt her to see it go, it seemed right. Maybe the land, in its own way, was taking payment for the amount of evil her mother had caused. The violence she'd let in.

Huge cracks cut through the land, severing and separating it. The earth on which the group of them stood shifted, sank.

Wait. Kalivani blinked, looked around, studied the landscape. No. They weren't sinking. The ground under them was rising.

As rock spilled away and mud ran, the ground opened up, wide and threatening. It made a horrendous roar, as if expelling something deep from its gut. As if the earth itself was struggling.

Then, bit by bit, it rose.

The towers emerged first.

Gold and silver. Swirled together with Damascus.

The huge doors, carved of four types of wood and shimmering with gems for bolts.

The huge walls, intersected with dragon scale.

So high into the atmosphere it seemed to rise...a mountain in and of itself, a kingdom self-contained.

Tyr stammered, sounding like a frightened dove. Babbling and frantically flapping his hands or grasping his braids. If the cause of his hysteria hadn't whisked all Kalivani's breath away, she'd have found it cute. "It is…it's…that..."

"Impossible. It's a story, no more." From one of the human women.

"How could this—?" From a wide number of people, some with cursing, some without but all with such awe their voice never rose an octave above a whisper. There was an unspoken reverence, as people fell to their knees and could gape at what they knew was legend made flesh.

Kalivani was the first to stand again, her eyes ashine and the golden glow from the city dusting her cheeks so they came to life with pink and crimson. "Zadkhanûn."

It was. It had to be. Nothing else could have possibly explained the design, the coloring, the sudden rising from the earth.

“It’s Zadkhanûn.”

After gathering her breath—a task in and of itself, she stalked forward, head up, hands shaking, and made her way to the grand doors. The little child inside of her wanted to squeal and dance and twirl about in circles, but all she could manage was a low exhale amid her trembling.

Her fingers brushed the wood. It was solid and firm under them. This was no illusion or trick. This was real.

With a light push, the doors caved inward, falling open, with the sound of solid hinges and strength embodied. As if they’d been assembled and built yesterday. Fresh. New.

Hands to her face, covering her mouth, Kalivani walked into a courtyard interlaid in gems and silver. To her left and right, there were fields, round and proportioned, but they rose from the ground. A flat disc on the courtyard floor then another above, slightly pushed over its predecessor and so on and so forth until six levels rose on either side.

Bubbling and the gentle spring of fresh water delighted the ears and it was easy to find its source. Or rather, it’s multiple sources. Spilling from one field to the other, a grand fountain rose in tiers of blue and purple, trickling falls from each of the towers to spill into beautiful pools surrounded by gardens of green.

Enticed, she approached the fields and knelt, digging her fingers into them. Rich and fragrant, the soil offered up its proof of fertility in the form of small sprouts. Not yet tendered but a sign of what could come.

The stone was healthy.

“It’s everything the stories said.”

By now, the click and clank of other shoes had joined her and a harmony of gasps and grabbing fingers throughout the courtyard had followed. As she walked, head arched upward, she found towers, wide and fat at the base and then curling to tight spaces in the heavens looming over her head, as if an invitation.

It was more than enough for a thousand people.

“Why now?” She spoke, mainly to herself. “Why stay contained in the earth for so long to rise up now?”

“I’d say it’s pretty straight forward, Daughter.”

Turning, she smiled, tears decorating her cheeks as Friga made her way to her side, wrapping her tightly in a hug. Her *Nanki.*

“How? How is this straight forward at all?”

“Well, you need rich fields. You need water. You need shelter for your people. Here it is. Mother Stone listens, even if we sometimes don’t believe it.”

“But that doesn’t explain why She’d answer for me and not for the others that came before me.”

“I’d say it makes perfect sense.” The older dwarrow ran her fingers along the gold, silver, iron and steel as they walked. “The Stone Mother took it away when it became abused. When the people who ruled forgot that a kingdom is in people and not a place.”

Kalivani considered such an explanation as she walked and found herself drifting up to the door that led into the main section of the large building. As the doors fell open, she said, “Helga was trying to rebuild it. Trying to make it out of anything she could—blood, Fae magic, anything she thought might work.”

“Aye, but she forgot a kingdom is made of the people, not the place. As much as you may have driven me crazy sometimes, my girl, you have never forgotten that. And now, look at your people.”

Turning to look over her shoulder, Kalivani’s eyes drifted over the courtyard. Dwarves helping human men to assess what tools they could find. Dwarrow examining the richness of the soil. Children, of all types, laughing at the way the gold and silver Damascus distorted their faces.

“Mother Stone said She would return the gift to her children when they were ready.” Taking hold of the girl’s hand, she gestured her to kneel and Kalivani did so. “She chose you, my Kalivani. Child of stone you are, as much as I am. Child of human you are as well. Mother Stone said She would return it when it had been earned back. That could only be achieved by a human as they were the ones that lost it. And, stubborn spirit that She is, She also said it must be one of Her children to earn back the right.”

Kalivani gazed down at herself. The soft skin of human, the calloused proof of dwarven work ethic. The flowing hair of dwarf, the painlessness of human tresses. The love for her human people and her dwarven family.

Two in one. Oddly specific.

Mother Stone was certainly eccentric. But then, if the Mother of All was anything like her Mama—her Friga—then perhaps it suited.

“Kalivani!”

Tyr made his way through the crowd to join them. “There is everything here you need! Water! Soil, shelter.”

“But…” Her voice faltered. “But what about you?” Glancing about, she asked, “You aren’t happy in wide open spaces and—?”

He laughed. “Kalivani, you haven’t even seen what’s below.”

“Below?”

Taking her hand, he pulled her down the stairs and to the other side of the large fountain. Carved into the ground was translucent silver. Through those tiles she saw forges, tunnels arched right out into the earth at the city's base, as if they had always been there.

It was a city made not for humans and not for dwarves but for both.

From a time when they had fought side by side.

Lived and laughed together.

Tearing her eyes from it, she looked around again.

Oh, there were certainly a handful that withdrew and clung to the walls away from the dwarves. Yet, overwhelmingly, the people mingled, cautious but curious, with the dwarves that had answered their need for aid. New relationships, full of potential and willingness.

"Kind of like we are now, isn't it? Another chance." Tyr's voice sounded far away and yet from the depth of her own heart all at the same moment. "With the right guidance, anyway."

Sure seemed as clear a symbol as any. The city needed work to rebuild it, to bring heat back to its forges. To bring song back to its halls, to bring crops back to its fields. It was a task requiring sweat, tears, and leadership.

"Don't think I can do this on my own." She said finally, "But then, I don't think I'll be on my own, will I?'

Tyr hugged her tight, reached his hand up and caressed her braids. "Well, I'm not going anywhere. I made you a promise. And well, if you have to stay here to help your people—"

"You're all my people. Dwarf, human. All of it. If this means anything to me, it's that we belong together. You, me. Our two races. Look what we already did together! Sorry it took me five years to figure it out."

Create.

Seemed so long ago, remembering it. The night after Friga had claimed her as family, sealed her place. A place that seemed so alien at first glance then became so right that she wondered how she ever lived before it. Took her longer still to realize that.

Create.

At the time, it seemed to be a good distraction—explore creativity until she found herself. Now though, looking down at who she was now: feeling her dwarven marks, gazing at the Damascus hammer in her hand, foolishness so strong came upon her that she nearly laughed aloud.

"Don't find yourself." She said, aloud. "The self you're looking for doesn't exist. Create. Yourself."

“Better late than never.” Friga shook her head and took her place at her side. “Stubborn as the stone of the earth you are, but I’m glad you finally realize.” She paused, considered. “Who are you now, Kalivani?”

“Kalivani. Daughter of Friga. Promised to Tyr. Blacksmith, my specialty is knives though.” She tossed her wrist a bit, letting the slightly dented hammer in her hand shimmer. “I may be interested in expanding that. I’m human. And dwarrow. Both. I’d like to stay with both.”

“Child, these dwarves came to fight for you. To die for what you deemed right. I doubt they’re going to leave their sister and daughter. Not when she still has need of them.” She waved her hand about. “And these humans took a vow to you. Not because you’re a Princess but because you came back for them.”

“Exactly.” Tyr grinned. “And you’ll get to be Queen Kalivani, the first Queen of the revived Zadkhanûn. Maybe I need a new name. Would sound weird next to your all fancy title.”

Laughing, she gave him a gentle push. “I like your name. Strength. It suits you. It’s true—lucky I always had you to fall back on when my heart didn’t stop to listen to my head.” Running her nails through his scalp, rubbing the roots of the braids, she giggled at his low groan of pleasure. “Besides, it’s easy to pronounce. I can promise you no matter how many times you try to tell the people my dwarven name, they’re going to mispronounce it.”

Friga shook her head. “They might surprise you. But, I have a feeling you’re right. You still butcher our language.”

Unable to deny it, she considered, standing side by side by Tyr. “Maybe I need something they can pronounce. But something means about the same as my dwarf name.”

“White Star?”

“Naw, not like a literal translation. Those always sound weird.”

“Well, what’s white and glows for humans? Besides fire and stars?”

Kalivani looked about, considering his statement. He had a point. What did glow and shimmer to humans but could have the same double meaning flames had for dwarves? Something beautiful yet destructive? “I’ll have to think on it. Or maybe I can let you give it to me so I don’t have to figure it out!”

“You’re passing the pick!”

She laughed but made no denial.

There would be time to figure that little detail out later. Taking Tyr’s arm in hers, she said, “Come on, Tyr. Let’s go and help out. We’ve got a kingdom to rebuild and I bet there’s some need for dwarven hammer

and skill! And maybe a dose of ‘strength.” She ran her fingers through his hair again, just to make sure he caught the double meaning.

As they made their way down the stairs, Kalivani stopped and knelt, letting her lips glide over Tyr’s, even as her fingers caught his hair and braided her love into them in soft dips and digs. She relished in the warmth, the closeness and the stone beneath her feet sang out in rejoice.

He teased her in response, wrapped his finger into her hair, and caressed the bead of promise sitting there. Reaching up with his other hand, he traced the outline of her lips, red as any of the roses set to bloom and rested on her soft skin, pale as…

“Snow.” He said. “Snow White.”

“Snow White?” She repeated.

“Snow White.” He confirmed. “It glows. It creates beautiful things. It can destroy if it wants. And if you find yourself caught up in it, it’s so easy to lose yourself in the grey of her eyes.”

Catching his chin in her hand, she toyed with his beard, rested her forehead on his and said, “As long as I’m with you, I don’t mind how lost we become.”

Lips met, hair embraced and souls matched.

No fear. No doubt. Even amid a future yet to be built, there was trust. A deep, unbreakable trust.

She would never be lost again.

If there was one consistency in Kalivani—in Queen Snow White’s world— it would forever be:

Trust dwarves.

THE END

Acknowledgments



This book is quite literally a childhood dream that I can now hold in my hand. It began before I even knew how to put a book together and I went through so many horrific projects before gaining my footing. Fairy tales have always been a deep love of mine and developing them into cultures and worlds of my own has been my own personal heaven. I have so many people that I owe this to.

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of my stories with you. I have so many more people and places to invite you to and I sincerely hope you enjoy exploring them as much as I love creating them.

Until next time…don't find yourself. Go create yourself.

Author's Note

If you've turned to this page from the notice in the beginning, here is where you will find the CWs for Mirrors and Ashes.

This book contains violence, language and child abuse, specifically emotional abuse. While there is not in depth detail of these topics, I feel it is necessary to make them known for my readers that may have a past history of trauma to consider.

Please make sure you are in the right state of mind to handle these topics before reading.

I hope you enjoy.

About the Author



Cat Bowser has been writing stories since before she even knew how to write. Starting with simple drawings in comic book format, once the art of writing was bestowed upon her in first grade, there was no stopping her. Fanfiction, poems, short stories, long stories, novels—all she knew was that she had entire worlds stuck in her head and she needed to get them out.

When she isn't crafting fantasy worlds, she lives in Arizona with her husband Stephen and two pint sized dogs. Outside of writing, she works as a licensed associate counselor as the spirit and psychology of the person is of immense interest to her. Relationships of all types—romantic, platonic, familial, she loves to explore them. You'll find more than a sampling of it in her stories. In her off time, you can find her reading, writing fanfiction, researching mythology and languages and returning to Middle Earth again and again.

Fantasy is her life and she's running with it.

Visit her online and stay up to date on future adventures:
catbowser.wixsite.com/catbowserauthor